



the **DIRTY PAIR**

strike again



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Kei and Yuri hunt a monster on an alien planet!

ダーティペアの大逆転

Dirty Pair II

The Dirty Pair Strike Again

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The Dirty Pair Strike Again

prologue

The darkness was broken.

Bowed down to the darkness, the Absolute Children of Heaven, sensing a great presence, simultaneously lifted their heads and opened their eyes.

There was a bare entryway. But it wasn't clear how big it was. Only on the ground around the followers was there a faint shimmer, all else was veiled in night. There were forty followers present. The blackness spread in front of them was thick like tar.

What split open was this dense darkness.

It started as a thin light outlining the opening, then in an instant it opened to the side.

The surface revealed a white band of light, shattering through the black, radiating out.

From the center of the light the leader appeared.

The leader was a being of light. His robe shone brightly and his head was bathed in a white glow.

The opening closed, returning to darkness. In front of the pitch-black space stood the shining leader.

Suddenly, the leader raised both of his hands. A light appeared from his fingers and danced through the darkness.

"My children...," the leader spoke. The voice was deep and the words sounded scripted. "I bring you terrible news from Boralura."

An audible wave of surprise spread through the crowd. The leader paused and his followers gazed at him in anticipation.

“The Gods of Destruction are coming!”

The leader spoke with force after his long pause.

The followers repeated the words in chorus. “Gods of Destruction...”

“The two entities making up of the Gods of Destruction will attack Chakra. They bring great catastrophe to us, the chosen people—this is what Boralura told me.”

“Leader, what can we do?” a man in the center of the front row asked, his hands pressed together in front of his chest in a sign of respect.

“We get one step ahead of them!” said the leader, turning to the man dramatically.

“Before they reach Chakra, we must go to them. We must go to them and kill them. This is Boralura’s wish.”

“Attack the Gods of Destruction!”

“Geff! Jira! Zuma!”

The leader called out three names. These were not their given names, but their baptismal names.

“Yes!”

The three stepped out from the front row and called out in unison. They each fell to one knee with their backs stiff at attention. The man who’d spoken to the leader moments previously was Geff.

“You three receive a divine gift. Behold the strength of Boralura,” said the leader. “Eliminate the Gods of Destruction. Go, and remove them from existence!”

“Yes!” The three followers bowed their heads.

“Where can we find the Gods of Destruction?” Geff asked.

“Near the Lamb Constellation...”

The leader raised his right hand high.

“Planet Lyonesse.”

what's that? headquarters is in trouble!

"You two got some fan mail."

Department Chief Soranaka grudgingly tossed a bundle of discs onto the desk. The messages were sent by hyperwave and then recorded onto the discs. And there were a lot of them. At a glance I would estimate there were around a hundred in the bunch. One disc can hold at least fifty messages, so this was going to be a real pain. It would take me the rest of my life to check every single piece of fan mail.

"What would you say if I took a little peek at a couple of these messages?"

The Department Chief looked at us with a suspicious interest. Both of his hands lay flat on the desk, and his head was tilted a little to the left. His lips broke into a well-meaning smile. But his eyes revealed an ulterior motive. Someone who didn't know him might just have seen a balding oldster in his fifties, but Soranaka has been here since the creation of the WWWA, and had been an ogre as the head of the Crime Trouble Consultation Department for the past six years. I wasn't about to be fooled by this soft-as-buttercream look on his mug. Even United Galactica's Central Computer would have trouble figuring out what his real intentions were.

"Yes, well, I think it's probably better not to," I responded clearly. The content of our mail was really none of the chief's business.

"I will look through them when I come back later."

"Oh, c'mon. What harm could it do?"

From my side resounded a voice which had just dismantled my careful maneuvering. It was Yuri. She leaned with her cheeks resting in her hands, her

big black eyes sparkling innocently.

“I want to hear at least one of the messages as soon as possible. Find one from a handsome young buck...”

“Aa—”

I almost died right there. I fell off of my stool, but caught the side of the desk before I fell. Knowing that the stool I sat on was simply a cylinder resting on the floor with no back support, why did she have to say something so asinine?!

“Yuri!” I said, still holding myself up using the desk and glaring in her direction. “We were called here by the chief to talk about work. We didn’t come here to check discs.”

“But...” Yuri squirmed back and forth as she sat precariously on her narrow stool. It was almost like she had practiced this move.

“Don’t worry. It’s fine,” the chief butted in. “In fact, it is perfectly all right. Young and handsome guy, right? Got it. I’ll pick out a good one for you.”

Really, you don’t need to. Stop, please. But there was no time to say what I wanted (but I probably wouldn’t have said anything, even if there was). He grabbed the first disc out of the bunch and quickly tossed it into a drive next to him.

I clicked my tongue and peered at Yuri from the corner of my eye. She sat there staring wide-eyed. The chief turned with his back to us and began to whistle a tune.

The wall behind him turned into one big screen, and flickered to life.

I mumbled a few choice words under my breath.

Make no mistake, it was a young, handsome man on the screen. On top of that, he was blond with a slender face. The only thing I didn’t like was the chief messing with our mail. In this case, I was more concerned with age over looks, as this kid was, at the most, ten years old. Even if I were to squint I couldn’t see a boy over the age of twelve. This is just a little child! What was going on here?!

“Chief!” My cheeks became flushed and my stiff back slumped. I could complain all I wanted, but we’d asked for young and handsome.

“Oh, did I make a mistake? I thought this fit into the parameters you were looking for,” the chief said innocently, even scratching his head for emphasis.

“This boy is so cute!” said Yuri, enchanted by the image on the screen. I almost died on the spot again. Since I was already hunched over, I almost fell off the table to the floor.

“To the ladies of Dirty Pair,” the boy on the screen began to speak.

“Wait! Isn’t he kinda young?”

Yuri finally focused. Blockhead! There was no response worthy of her idiotic question.

“This message is in thanks for solving the crisis in space. Thank you very much.”

What in the world... I thought. Wasn’t this supposed to be a typical fan letter? His monotone delivery made it sound as if he was reading it, and I didn’t really appreciate him calling us Dirty Pair, but, on the other hand, he was giving us proper thanks. The department chief gave a distasteful glare that really bugged me. What did I do?

There was no time to worry about the chief now. This young lad’s message was full of some very splendid statements.

“Thanks to you, our planet is completely free of bad guys. But it’s completely free of good people, too. My home is gone as well. Now I am calling on my relatives and I am being moved from planet to planet. I have a request to the ladies of Dirty Pair. Give me back my home. Give me back my school. Give me back my friends. Give me back the amusement park. Give me back my town. Give me back the ocean. Give me back the mountains. Give me back my life—”

I couldn’t take another second. I stood up, extended my hand to the chief’s console, and punched the switch on the disc drive. The screen went black.

“Hey, Kei! He was so cute!” Yuri whined. What goes on in her head is a complete mystery to me.

“That is really sad. That’s gotta be tough for him.”

The chief made an even bigger scene out of his statement, pulling out a

handkerchief and wiping his nose.

“Chief, what is it that you are trying to get across to us?” I asked him sharply.

“Nothing special,” he said, feigning a look of innocence glancing in my direction. “Just, that poor kid, that poor poor kid—”

“So spit it out! What is it?!”

I took a step closer to him.

“When you think about it, Noguros was a real disaster,” the chief said with a sigh, as he slyly retreated to the sofa.

“It started out as a simple fender-bender, but then a case was filed with the WWWA and since the Central Computer chose to dispatch you two, the conflict was resolved by setting a city on fire, dropping a continent into the ocean, and then the entire planet’s atmosphere was contaminated with noxious gas.”

“Grr,” I muttered under my breath as a rumble formed in the back of my throat. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t refute what he had said. What had happened at Noguros was pretty much how Department Chief Soranaka had described it.

“Oo hoo hoo!”

Yuri’s face had fallen into her hands.

“Those poor people! The people of Noguros! Oo hoo hoo...”

As Yuri cried her shoulders shook (I see this quite a bit). Yuri is a better actress than I am.

“Every time the Central Computer chooses you two for a mission my life expectancy grows a little bit shorter,” the chief belted out, obviously frustrated.

“It truly makes me wonder why they dispatch TCs at all.”

“Come on, Chief!”

I had opened my mouth, but I hadn’t figured out what to say yet.

“Just wait...”

I wasn’t going to let the chief’s chiding get the best of me.

“I understand what you are trying to say,” the chief said, slowly rolling his head in a circle from left to right. “But you are implying that no matter who was sent, the same thing would have happened.”

“Correct,” I nodded with my answer.

“You next case better have some different results from Noguros—” the chief let out another deep sigh, and picked up a thick plastic folder off his desk. “—because the Central Computer has chosen you two out of all the Crime TCs available right now. And to be honest with you, it frightens me. No matter who the boss is on this case, what happened on the last one could easily happen again with you two at the helm.”

Grr. The chief’s fears weren’t unmerited. Almost everything he said was on the money.

“Snff. Unh-hunh”

Yuri was still crying.

“Enough, all right?” I nudged Yuri with my left elbow.

“Okay.”

Yuri gave a little nod, and returned her hands to her knees and gave a little giggle. That little... Her eyes weren’t red at all, and her makeup hadn’t run one bit. The chief’s shoulders sagged in surprise.

“All right, then...” I said, trying to get things back on track (and off of Noguros). “So, what do you plan to do with us? Are you going to ignore the Central Computer’s orders and take us off duty?”

“I cannot do that,” he said, weakly waving his hand. “That’s why I asked you here right now. It’s been decided that you are the best to resolve this case. I can only pray that you solve this case peacefully and without incident, and then quietly come back home.”

“Is this because of that boy’s message?”

“Well, sure, that’s a part of it.”

“He sure was cute!” Yuri said out loud. This time the chief and I both almost died together.

“On that note, let’s get to our next case—”

After a moment of recovery, the chief collected himself and was able to give us the scoop on the latest incident.

“The location is planet Chakra.”

“Chakra?” Yuri and I said in unison, tilting our heads. During the intense WWWA training a wide variety of information was pounded into our brains, so Yuri and I have almost every planet-state’s name memorized. We had never heard the unique name of Chakra.

“It’s not surprising that you aren’t familiar with it,” the chief said softly, noticing our reaction to its mention. “Chakra is retained by Mandala strictly as a mining planet.”

“In the Constellation Cancer...”

“Correct.”

When it comes to planet-state Mandala, then we know plenty. It actually has several mining colony planets in its possession, making it a very large state, in its own way.

Year 2111. Mankind achieves warp speed transport technology. It was a supreme gift from the heavens, as mankind’s explosive population increase had all but saturated its living space at the time. Humans went to space to search for Earth-like planets, and colonization began.

Thirty years pass. Mankind has reached the far corners of the galaxy, and has colonized planets in over three thousand solar systems, creating new states in the process. Now independent of the Earth, the colonists gave each colonized planet the designation of “planet-state.” Within a planet-state rich in natural resources, allowances were made in the state’s budget to assist in more emigration, and separate governing bodies were created. What was most scooped into these larger governing bodies were mining planets rich in valuable

minerals and chemical elements.

Over time, rich states got richer, and the United Earth Commonwealth started developing a small group of super-powers. Mandala, which had taken possession of Chakra, was a pretty representative model of those kinds of super-power planet-states.

“Chakra is still considered a fairly recent development,” continued the chief. “It’s in a remote area of the southern part of the Cancer Constellation, and it just sat there, undiscovered, for a long, long time.”

“Isn’t that the outer rim of the galaxy?” Yuri asked. Finally, she said something worth listening to. She certainly was right, the southern area of Pisces would be right on the edge of the galaxy. From the WWWA Headquarters on Lyonesse, Chakra is over 110,000 light years out.

“The population is somewhere around fifteen thousand. There is one city located smack in the center of the continent. From the outside, Aslaville looks like a real city, and the majority of the population is concentrated there.”

“It’s a mining town. There isn’t a nightlife or any decent men,” Yuri whispered into my ear. That wouldn’t do. It’s pure insanity!

“By standard time, the incident took place twelve days ago in Aslaville.”

As the Department Chief spoke Yuri and I shot quick glances at each other. It seemed he was aware of Yuri’s whispering, and I tried to cover it up by sitting up straight and smiling adoringly. He responded only with a scowl.

“This was not an altruistic incident,” said the chief after clearing his throat. “A miner was bit on the leg by an unidentified animal.”

“Wha—?”

I couldn’t believe what I had just heard.

“Bitten. Deep into his leg.”

The chief reiterated his statement slowly, one word at a time.

“Did he live?” I asked.

“He is alive.”

This time Yuri asked the question. “Was his leg torn off or anything?”

“No, it’s still very much attached.”

“Well, then it must have been a terrible wound.”

“It was completely healed in three days’ time. There were still teeth marks, but those disappeared after a week.”

“What’s the big deal then?” I said, raising my voice.

It was true that when called to examine even the most trivial of cases the Central Computer selects a WWWA Crime Trouble Consultant to investigate the scene. Be that as it may, it didn’t happen very often. This wasn’t in our job description. This was better left to local hunters and the police.

“I know you might be a little surprised...,” the chief said, wearing a solemn expression.

Hmph. I wasn’t surprised. I was mad.

“There are two factors by which the Central Computer made its decision. One is the shape of the teeth marks found on the victim. These are the teeth marks of an unknown life-form, and that’s after comparing them to all known life-forms in the galaxy.”

“What’s the other factor?” I asked in a firm tone.

“The circumstances surrounding the incident. The event took place just before noon. In broad daylight. The location was downtown Aslaville. The street was full of people coming and going. The man who was bitten—a middle-aged miner named Landis —well, there were at least ten people within five meters of where he was when he was attacked. This came from the police investigation.”

“And so?”

“And so, no one, not even Landis himself, witnessed the creature that attacked him.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, leaning forward without realizing it.

“If you believe the report, Landis was walking in Section Five of downtown when suddenly invisible fangs bit into his leg.”

“It’s the monster from the stories!” Yuri screamed in a high-pitched voice. “It must be the monster from the stories!”

“It’d be more helpful if you made your conclusions after you check out the scene.”

The chief was good at quieting the screeching Yuri.

“Departure is at 0930 hours,” he said, glancing at his wristwatch.

“*Lovely Angel* is at the space port and on standby, ready to go.”

The chief stood up.

“And as you do your work, don’t forget what that boy said in his message, all right?” added the chief.

Hmph, this is what he was leading up to the whole time. My only response was a grouchy scowl.

Yuri hopped off her stool. The stool sunk down into the floor. She was wearing a top with a neckline that barely covered her chest, and hardly there V-cut hot pants, along with knee-high boots that gave off a bright silver glow, reflecting in the light. Hanging from her belt was a jumbo-sized ray gun. I was wearing almost the exact same outfit, but on my hip was a heatgun.

“Just let me live a long, full life,” said the chief, extending his right hand to us for a handshake. After that sermon he expects a handshake? My heart wasn’t in it, but I responded accordingly.

That’s when it happened.

We sensed “life.”

3

In an instant I grabbed the chief’s hand, and then pulled it almost too hard. Taken completely off-guard, the chief flew over the desk, and letting out a shout, crashed headfirst just before us. I wrapped my arm around his neck and felt his body sink.

And at the same time the desk blew into a mangled mess.

The giant carbon resin desk had been torn into pieces with a loud crackle and crunch. His sofa also burst apart, tearing through the fabric and cushions, collapsing in a heap.

As I pushed the chief against the floor and covered him, I quickly examined every direction. At my back was Yuri with her ray gun drawn, squatting low and on the ready. I had also reflexively drawn my heatgun.

My gaze returned forward. The chief's office window. The large window looked out over Headquarters' central garden. The entire wall was a clear glass pane. Naturally, it was made of the absolute top-of-the-line bulletproof material. It was impenetrable by any shell or explosive, and the refractive index was so carefully fine-tuned that even a perfectly aimed laser shot would be deflected into nothing.

Yuri and I stood looking through that window trying to assess the situation. Without any question, whoever had turned the sofa and desk into scrap was on the other side of the glass. From here we couldn't tell what kind of weapon they'd used or from what direction, but we were sure it was from outside.

And we got evidence of that soon enough.

The window started breaking.

Suddenly the clear glass turned red. It warped and heaved right before our eyes and then a piercing roar filled our ears as the window exploded. The tiny blobs of melted glass came flying in our direction.



I leapt backward. Yuri also turned away.

“Ow! Hot hot hot!”

The chief wriggled in pain.

Whoops. I’d forgotten we were protecting the chief.

Pieces of hot glass had hit him straight on his back and grayish smoke began to rise from his shirt as he writhed around on the floor.

Yuri and I turned on our heels to help the chief, and momentarily averted our gaze from where the window used to be.

In that moment of distraction they struck.

By the time we noticed, it was too late. Three black shadows had jumped into the room through the torn-apart window.

I pushed off the floor with my foot, putting space between me and the chief. I felt bad for him, but I hadn’t yet figured out what the next move would be. I went to position myself with the door to my back, and Yuri was doing the same against the far wall.

As we spun through the air, we fired the heatgun and ray gun. The laser beam and heat ray intersected just over the chief’s head. It wasn’t on purpose. That just happened to be where the invaders were.

Above the desk on the side closest to the window were two flag stands. One was a United Galactica flag and the other represented the WWWA. The laser beam cut through the flag poles and the heat ray burned the wall behind them.

The wall burst into flames, which caught the flags on fire. The flags slowly fell from the cut poles, spreading the fire further.

That’s right where the unlucky chief had crawled to.

The chief had mostly shaken off the burned glass shards, and he had crawled to the edge of the wall to get out of the way, which was right where the fire we had started was now. The burning flag leaned over onto his back.

“Ugyaa!” the chief screamed, tossing any remaining dignified middle-age pride into the fire. He flapped his arms and legs into the air uncontrollably,

noisily pounding the floor.

Oh dear.

I held my head in my hands, as there was nothing I could have done.

“Kei, above you!” yelled Yuri.

Before I could think my body reacted.

I rolled forward, doing a full three-sixty and stopping with my heatgun’s muzzle pointed at the ceiling. From that position, I pulled the trigger. The shadow bolted, deftly dodging the heat rays, and crossing above me. Wow... it was fast. In an instant it had moved from one end of the room to the other.

Yuri was randomly shooting her ray gun. She wasn’t aiming at the shadows, but aligning herself with the wall. It may have made logical sense, but it was pretty annoying.

A laser beam struck the left side of my abdomen. There was a sizzling sound and a white vapor rose up. My top and shorts are separate, so by all appearances it looks as if my midriff is completely bare. However, that isn’t actually the case. I was covered in an ultrathin and transparent super-strong polymer. The sound and vapor was proof of the polymer evaporating from the heat of the laser beam. The polymer was created by a WWWA research facility, and was used for its bullet-stopping and heat-resistant capabilities. However, it did have its limitations. If I kept taking hits from Yuri’s ray gun, I would start springing leaks.

In search of a shield, I ran through the room. The only thing in the big empty office that I could use to protect this one-of-a-kind body was more likely the scrap that was heaped where the chief’s desk used to be. I jumped over to the far side of the pile. The chief, who had swatted out the fire from the flag, was facing upward, twitching and wiggling.

Two of the shadows attacked me from either side.

Holding down the trigger, I swept the heatgun from left to right. The shadows slipped between the heat rays.

There was a massive shock. Like an explosion, the scrap shield blew apart into

tiny pieces.

Blown from the gun blast, I flew into the wall with what remained of the desk, now a mountain of splinters.

With a jump off the wall I fell to the floor.

And right on to where the chief was laid out.

“!”

The chief had no voice left in him.

The shadows came.

I’m sorry, Chief!

I cleared away the scrap from the desk, and using the chief as a stepping stone, I did a jumping slide. His stomach was pretty soft, and didn’t give me much to push off of.

I twisted my upper torso, pointing the heatgun behind me. There were two shadows closing in from different directions as I desperately started shooting.

The heat ray swept over the shadows. The shadows separated, one darting left and the other right. Now. With my left hand I squeezed the ring wrapped around the ring finger of my right hand. The ring made a small click.

“Kei!”

Yuri had arrived. She gave me a hand. I stood up. Urp. Yuri was a bit beat up here and there. Even with the super-strength polymer cover on, she had cuts and bruises all over her arms and legs. Over her snow-white skin were spots of crimson where blood oozed out from cuts. The collar on her top was torn, and there was even a tear in the instep of her boots.

“I called Mugi,” I said. “When he comes then it’s three-on-three.”

The shadows swept in. The floor in front of us split open and began to bulge, rising up. Giant cracking and crunching sounds filled the room.

What the hell was going on?! What kind of weapon were these things using?!

Yuri pushed me out of the way. Something just grazed my cheek and went past me. Wind? Heat? No, it was power. Raw energy combined with invisible

power attacking me.

The right side of my body went numb. My ears started ringing. I saw something flutter just outside my range of vision. Red. It's hair. It's my hair! You jerk! That's a woman's soul! And I just went to the beauty salon and had it set in a wolf-cut style yesterday! My hair might be kinky, but it's still important to me! For that... for that... I will cut you down!

I aimed the heatgun at the wall. In moments it erupted into a terrific blaze. The shadows drew back, ever so slightly. Yuri sent a constant laser stream from her ray into the flames.

"Kei... Yuri..."

We heard a voice. It was a feeble call.

I turned around.

It was the chief. As hurt as he was, he was trying to get up. Don't overdo it, Chief. Don't attract attention to the shadows!

"It's a fire. What are you doing?" he mumbled weakly, taking in his surroundings. It seemed he'd taken a hit to the head. He didn't seem to understand the situation.

Yuri clicked her tongue. The shadows had turned and focused on the chief. I readied the heatgun.

But.

I didn't shoot. If I were to fire, I would bum the chief.

Zrr-Zrr.

A heavy sound shook the room. The floor began to move slightly. The wall facing us began to shake. It was the wall with the giant screen embedded into it. Due to the shaking, the power seemed to have been switched on. The screen gave off a blue flickering glow.

This is. This feeling is.

A crack ran up the giant screen. Fragments began falling to the floor.

The shadows were confused. Due to their panic, they lost interest in the chief.

The crack widened.

It broke open completely.

Insulation, plastic, and pieces of the screen all fell together toward us. Oh no! Right at the chief!

The chief completely disappeared. When the rumbling stopped and the gray cloud of dust cleared, we could see a mountain of rubble where the chief had just stood. Looking closely, you could see what looked like one arm sticking out of the heap. There was no doubt that it was the chief's arm.

A huge hole in the wall had opened. The video screen was gone. Torn wires and broken pipes framed the edges of the giant opening.

From the opening entered a fourth shadow.

This shadow was different from the others. Its movements were similar, but it was much bigger. On top of that, it was blacker than black. It was absolutely the color of midnight. A pitch-black shadow. A shadow darker than the abyss of deep space.

It was Mugi! Mugi had arrived!

4

“The Black Destroyer” or also “The Slaughter Beast of Terror”—Mugis have been given more sinister nicknames than these. Even in the vacuum of space, they can survive for long periods, and their intelligence is greater than that of human beings. From the outside, a Mugi looks a lot like a housecat from Earth, but is over two meters in length. The Mugi's jet-black body is amazingly flexible and nimble. His limbs are as thick as logs, and equipped with long, sharp nails that can tear through a three-centimeter steel plate like it was a piece of paper. Moreover, from each shoulder sprouts a long feeler with a suction-cup-like tip. The Mugi's tentacle-like appendages have more dexterity than human hands. Also, the Mugi's ears are actually tightly meshed whiskers. When vibrating this hair, a Mugi can take complete control of electricity and electromagnetic

energy.

The details of how Mugi came to us is quite an interesting story (but we'll save that tale for another time). Once a day Mugi needs to take one very expensive kalium capsule, but it never crosses our minds. Mugi can't really be called a pet. He's more of a special partner.

Mugi was in our room on the sixty-second floor of headquarters. When I told Mugi the department chief had called us, and asked us to meet him, he immediately crawled under the sofa. That's our Mugi! He knows what it means when the chief calls. By turning on the transmitter in my ring, I broadcast an emergency signal. Sensing the signal Mugi broke through the wall and smashed through the floors to run to us here on the fifteenth floor.

Once the three shadows saw Mugi, they became very agitated. Something that can move as fast as they could had arrived. The shadows turned away from us and focused their attention on the Mugi.

From three sides the shadows surrounded Mugi and circled around as they closed in. It was a black whirlwind.

Mugi growled. It was an angry sound as he lost control. The meshed whiskers where his ears should be began to vibrate and his feelers darted about. His long tail grew thicker and the muscles over his shoulders peaked.

Mugi jumped.

At the same time the shadows closed their circle.

The feelers caught the two shadows behind him and to his right. The shadow to his left was met with Mugi's front claws. He swung his feelers like a whip, pitching the shadows. With a snap, two intruders were tossed away. In order to chase after the flying Mugi, they moved off of the crumbled floor.

The shadow held in Mugi's claws stalled him. Mugi pressed his long claws right through it, and pulled the shape to him. As sparks fell he spun the shadow around like he was batting at a dragonfly. He pulled out his claws.

The shadow fell to the ground and stopped moving.

Mugi landed. The other shadows escaped. Once again, it was a phantom in

black.

But this time we could see. We could see very clearly. The shadows were human. The proportions were those of a human being. This was very strange—yes, his body was covered with a helmet and armor like a warrior from the Middle Ages. Around his lower back we could see where Mugi's claws had cut through the shadow. To the naked eye the armor looked very heavy, but it didn't seem to be made of metal. It looked as if it was made from some special soft material. I wasn't sure how the armor functioned, but those moves, that speed... it must have been some variety of powered suit. But a powered suit shouldn't be that smart—

—as I was considering the situation, the shadow rolled over. I then realized it was Mugi who was also trying to examine what lay before us. He looked up to us for help.

Yuri and I were in the corner of the room, near the door to the hallway. We didn't want to get between the shadows and Mugi when they were fighting. It wasn't clear whether the chief was alive or not, but since he was protected under the mountain of rubble, we weren't too concerned (a little cold, huh? Ha ha!).

Mugi jumped again. We readied our weapons.

Forming a long thin triangle, the shadows converged, and came at full speed. Mugi couldn't overtake them.

One by one we fired our weapons. And again. And again. We kept firing. Blast after blast after blast. We had no other choice.

Forming a spiral pattern the shadows dodged the laser beams and heat rays. No hits. Dammit, they were just too damn fast.

We persevered until the last possible moment.

The shadows pressed near.

At the last moment we threw ourselves out of the way. Even though we hadn't planned anything in advance, Yuri's and my timing and movements were exactly the same. The results of our intense training. As we moved I sensed a tremendous power fly by a paper-thin distance away from my side.

There was an enormous explosion.

The roar shook the air, and the upward shock seemed to lift the headquarters off its foundation. The boom was deafening, and my ears were ringing. The blast pressed us hard onto the floor. I couldn't breathe. My body felt a massive wave of heat.

In a frenzy, I turned over and lifted my head. The door and most of the walls had been blown away. There was a giant hole in their place, and I could now see the hallway clearly. Looking closely, the wall across the hallway was also heavily damaged.

Mugi was not between Yuri and me. With a violent rage he had bounded out of the room after the shadows.

Yuri and I looked at each other.

We have to follow them!

We stood up and dashed to the hallway.

5

I shouted as we bolted from the office.

The calm after the storm—no... I couldn't use such an everyday expression. That didn't have enough gravitas. I mean, this place was destroyed. The walls were blown to pieces, the floor was full of holes. The hallway was a rubble exhibition. In some places you could see through the holes all the way to the blue sky. Ah—nice weather today. This was the kind of day you should go for a hike with your boyfriend. And then maybe a trip to a fancy hotel, some quiet time... just the two of us...

"Kei!" Yuri shouted.

Back to reality. There were four black shadows in front of us. The three invaders and Mugi.

Wham!

The floor gave way. My legs buckled under the alternating big and small tremors. Like waves in the ocean, what comes in must go out. I didn't feel like I was in a building's hallway at all. The horizon was moving diagonally. Someone grabbed my wrist. The floor was swept away like sand. My legs hung in space.

I found out what happened afterward. Mugi and the Army of Shadows (who came up with that?) engaged in a fierce battle. The swirl of excess energy they gave off smashed through the Headquarters building.

All of the walls facing the main street below collapsed. That is to say, the building was basically split in half. If Yuri hadn't grabbed me by the arm I would have fallen as well. Many thanks, Yuri. I forgive you for eating my Kirschtorte the other day.

"Kei!" Yuri called after pulling me up to a still-standing area of the hallway. "Let's go to the roof. There are Shooters up there."

Shooters! Really? There are Shooters on the roof?

Simply put, a Shooter is a small, one-person, highly maneuverable fighter ship. It was actually designed by a WWWA research facility to fight enemies in powered suits, so it is incredibly fast and turns on a dime. The shooter was an experimental craft and Yuri and I were asked to do some test flights. We got to try a couple out one time. During that trial Yuri and I ended up completely destroying an entire heliport.

The same model Shooter was on the roof. Using it, we could match the speed of the shadows. But the building was half destroyed. We wouldn't know if the Shooter was in flying condition until we got to the roof.

Yuri and I ran deep into the still-standing half of the headquarters. There was an elevator that went directly to the roof. Of course, there was no guarantee it was still running. Either way it was fine.

Next to the elevator were the stairs. We could climb them to the eighty-fifth floor. We might die along the way, naturally.

Our prayers were answered when we discovered the elevator was somehow still operational. This elevator was designed for emergency use. In case of fire or earthquake all the other elevators shut down, but this one was set to run in the

most extreme conditions possible. And it was still going even after what just occurred...

Yuri and I jumped into the elevator. No shadows followed. It seemed the intruders and Mugi were engaged in quite a fight. For some reason, I had a really bad premonition about the outcome, but I did what I could to squash any negative thoughts in my mind.

We arrived on the roof and went to the heliport.

Wow! This was really something. The heliport had been split in half. The aircraft hangar was right near the edge of the split. The edge was crumbling a bit, but the hangar itself looked all right.

Yuri went to open the hangar door. But it was no use. It wouldn't budge. The entire archway must have bent, jamming the door closed. Yuri cut the door open using her ray gun.

There were three Shooters inside. Since they were still experimental prototypes, their respective fuselages were painted in different but equally eye-catching colors. One was scarlet red, another was yellow, and the third flyer was painted lime green. But they weren't just painted with one color each. Each had a garish two-tone striped pattern. Great advertising for a paint store!

Thinking about it for eighteen seconds, I chose the scarlet flyer. Yuri slipped into the yellow Shooter. The cockpit was pretty cramped. I'm 171 centimeters tall and weigh 54 kilos. My measurements are 91-55-91. Yuri is 168 centimeters tall and she weighs 51 kilograms with body measurements of 88-54-90. In the Shooter you lie on your stomach using an air cushion for body support, but this was a little rough. My chest and rear were squished in and my legs were too long, so it hurt my knees. My waist was too thick. The test pilots must have been some rail-thin little squirts with long torsos and stumpy legs.

After checking the fuel gauge, I lifted off. No problem. I had about thirty minutes worth of fuel. Yuri followed behind me.

The Shooter looks a lot like a shark without a tailfin. The wings don't look like wings. The waist area is curved, and that curve gives great lift and power to the vertical propulsion. The range of motion is possible through the high level verniers located all over the fuselage. If you can take the G-forces, it's possible

to do a one hundred eighty degree turn at Mach 5. Its weapons are two compact blasters. Little in size, but not in power. A smaller-sized building could be reduced to rubble in one shot. When we were testing the Shooter, we didn't know about the blasters, and that's why after one shot the heliport was wiped off the planet's surface.

We danced in the blue sky.

At a high speed and a low trajectory we began our search for Mugi and the three shadows.

It wasn't hard to track them. We really didn't need to look very hard. There was a trail of fire and smoke that led us to them. And all the buildings in their path had been destroyed. The streets had been smashed and air cars, buses, and trucks were in all states of disarray. Most vehicles were on fire. Here and there were some half-standing buildings still burning, but hardly enough worth mentioning. The city was noisy with sirens and emergency alarms as well as the chatter of curious onlookers. Now and then the sound of an explosion filled the atmosphere.

I responded with a pointed curse. The bad premonition I felt earlier had come true. If you can predict only one thing, you want it to be that innocent civilians will not be hurt or suffer damage.

Lyonesse is the home planet of the WWWA. There are three main continents and the WWWA has major institutions established on all of them. On the main continent of Aradia is the city of Danp Yu, where the Headquarters are located (and which were getting torn up before our eyes) and is a bustling metropolis where important goings-on happen day and night.

The WWWA (or Worlds Welfare Work Association) is not a private corporation. It's also not a foundation. It is a public utility to the over three thousand planet-states spread throughout the galaxy that are recognized as official members of United Galactica. Accordingly, on the WWWA planet of Lyonesse, there wasn't a single so-called non-government civilian. They are all employees of United Galactica. Every individual, from the manager of a drugstore to the kid at the register at a hamburger shop either came from one of the United planet-states, or was hired and registered for a specific job on

Lyonesse.

However, that's what made this situation even more volatile. We're Crime TCs, and are also employees of United Galactica; we appear to some as combatants. The majority of people living in this city were civilians. None of them could be happy about the danger we were putting them in. We needed to capture the shadows as fast as possible and gain control of the military force they were using.

"There they are!"

I heard Yuri's voice over the communicator as I saw her ship fly over my canopy and then descend. She was thirty degrees to my right. Not to be left behind, I hit the accelerator lever.

I blasted to Mach 2.

Suddenly the skyscraper in front of me began to break apart. It looked a lot like the chief's desk when it went to pieces. The floors just above the center of the building were splitting into small chunks and coming apart. At that spot the building broke into two.

That's it!

The battle must be happening on the other side of this building. I could see the triangle formation of the evil shadows.

And then they looked directly at me.

6

As I stared at the shadows drawing closer toward me I searched for signs of Mugi. My thoughts drifted to the worst-case scenario as their main target became me. Where was Mugi, who had kept them busy up until now?

Mugi was safe. He had hunkered down in the iron chunks of a collapsed building. They are called the "perfect living creature" but Mugi couldn't actually fly through the air. (Well, he could actually fly a plane or spaceship. He was

probably better at it than we were.) Until we had found our way through the wreckage, Mugi had been bounding from building to building as he engaged in battle. That may have been why the damage was so widespread, but it wasn't really Mugi's fault. Really.

The shadows were getting close. Ship sensors were buzzing, the LEDs on the targeting screen flashed brightly. As I pushed down the lever with one hand, I laid a finger on the blaster trigger with the other. Yuri had dropped her altitude below mine. They were flying at Mach 1 or Mach 2. I was maintaining my speed at Mach 2.

And then—a chill ran down the length of my spine. By reflex, I slapped the lever down. In an instant my flyer changed directions.

A noise resounded in the canopy. It sounded like a scream. The ringing in my ears pierced into my brain, for a brief moment everything went black. It was the power. And it missed my Shooter by a hair's width.

As I adjusted my course I maintained my targeting. I fixed my aim and pressed the trigger button.

The red blaze from my blaster struck one of the shadows. Following Yuri's lead, I descended. This way both of us could attack simultaneously from below.

The only problem was that the shadows came around behind us. We weren't about to surrender yet. Surrender surely meant death, right?

For the moment we just flew around each other in circles. Even though we were equipped with blasters, and had the power to fight, there was no opportunity for a diversion.

Then a thought flashed across my mind. Mugi! Mugi was below us. We needed his additional strength.

I slowed down, inviting the invaders closer. I didn't talk to Yuri with the communicator, but signaled to her with gestures from my cockpit. That was enough for her to understand what I was planning to do next.

I rose up and Yuri dropped.

The shadows chose to go two against one. This was slightly different than my

plan. A pair of the shadows followed Yuri. Well, that's okay. She knew how to get away.

I flew straight for the crumbled building Mugi was hiding in. The single shadow followed me closely. Off the subject, but I couldn't help but wonder how they flew.

I couldn't see Mugi anywhere, but I knew he was there. That was for certain.

I dropped my altitude even further. I was about five hundred meters from the ground when I slammed on the brakes as hard as I could. One weak point about the Shooter is that it can't fly well at low speeds.

I could almost touch the half-collapsed building with my hand. The shadow fired. A new crack opened in the structure. Walls broke apart and fell like an avalanche. This building was one of the intelligence centers for United Galactica. Oof! Below it was Danp Yu's finest fashion center and most buzzed about boutique arcade, the Heighcent Shopping Plaza. Oh, this was not good at all. It was this city's most bustling neighborhood.

I coiled around the Central Intelligence Building. I couldn't fire my weapons around here. I thought it might be best to get a little ways away from here.

But my thinking was ever-so-slightly too late.

It was exquisite timing. Following my Shooter circling the building the shadow tried to come around at me in a straight line, but he overshot the building and crossed into a different targeting path. This is when the scrapheap-hidden Mugi made his reappearance. It didn't look like he could intersect with the shadow. It looked like it would escape his fate, but Mugi was faster. The power was no use. The shadow found itself in Mugi's claws and fangs.

Torn and bitten, the shadow was thrown against a wall on the roof of a neighboring building. The shadow was a shadow no longer. It had stopped moving, and the armor was now visible clearly. There was a large rip in the armor from the chest to the abdomen, and blood was pouring out. His right arm was jutted out at an unnatural angle. Standing at the very edge of the half-destroyed building, there was no more power to resist from this one.

I turned around and got on his rear. Mugi and I both intended to strike

together our killing blow.

Then he resorted to his last line of defense.

He jumped from the top of the building.

The shadow flew out pretty far. He used every last bit of energy, I guessed. He went a horizontal distance of about eighty meters. He fell right into the center of the shopping plaza. If he'd have just died quietly like that, it really wouldn't have been a problem.

The problem was after crashing into the ground, he exploded.

A gigantic explosion. No doubt, it was from the armor.

The shopping plaza was blown away. A shopping plaza with likely several thousand customers inside at the time. There was nothing left. There was only a crater in the ground. The flames and smoke could be seen rising over one-kilometer-tall buildings.

Uwaaa—dizzy. I felt faint.

For a few moments everything went white. During that time the Shooter continued to fly, and I didn't crash, but I don't remember piloting for those moments. It's a miracle that my Shooter didn't crash due to the shockwave from the explosion.

I regained my senses thanks to Yuri's voice from the communicator.

"Kei! Kei! Kei!" Yuri called me in that tension-filled, high-pitched voice of hers. But I wasn't in any condition to respond.

"It's no good! They'll get me! I can't get away!"

It was registering this that snapped me back to consciousness. That was right. Yuri was fighting alone against two shadows. I hurriedly examined the radar. Yuri's mark was almost overlapped by the marks for the two shadows.

"Yuri!" I shouted, after turning on the communicator mic. "Escape to the outskirts! Go where there are no people! I'll be right there!"

I squeezed the accelerator. Mugi should have been able to hear our conversation. He also received the radar information.

I opened up the Shooter's main nozzle all the way.

As the name suggests, the ship took off like a bullet.

7

Yuri was somehow able to follow my instructions. However she really wasn't able to choose a good spot to go as she escaped. She didn't end up quite where I was hoping. But, it was sort of on the outskirts.

It was Northeast Danp Yu.

Danp Yu is adjacent to Lyonesse's largest space port. It's on the edge of the city, to the northeast.

I examined the radar and gritted my teeth. Why go this way, where we could get into even more trouble? There are plenty of areas around here that are barren with nothing to damage.

Before they had reached the space port I caught up to Yuri. I had been a bit frivolous with the fuel supply, this wasn't the time to worry about gas mileage.

"Drop down! For the moment, get down!"

I gave Yuri instructions for a second time. With the two shadows on her tail and no other options but escape, Yuri dropped her nose and took off in a zig-zag pattern.

I made my strike on the shadows. If I could hit one, I'd be happy, but that wasn't the only goal. It was mainly covering fire.

As expected, they dodged all my fire.

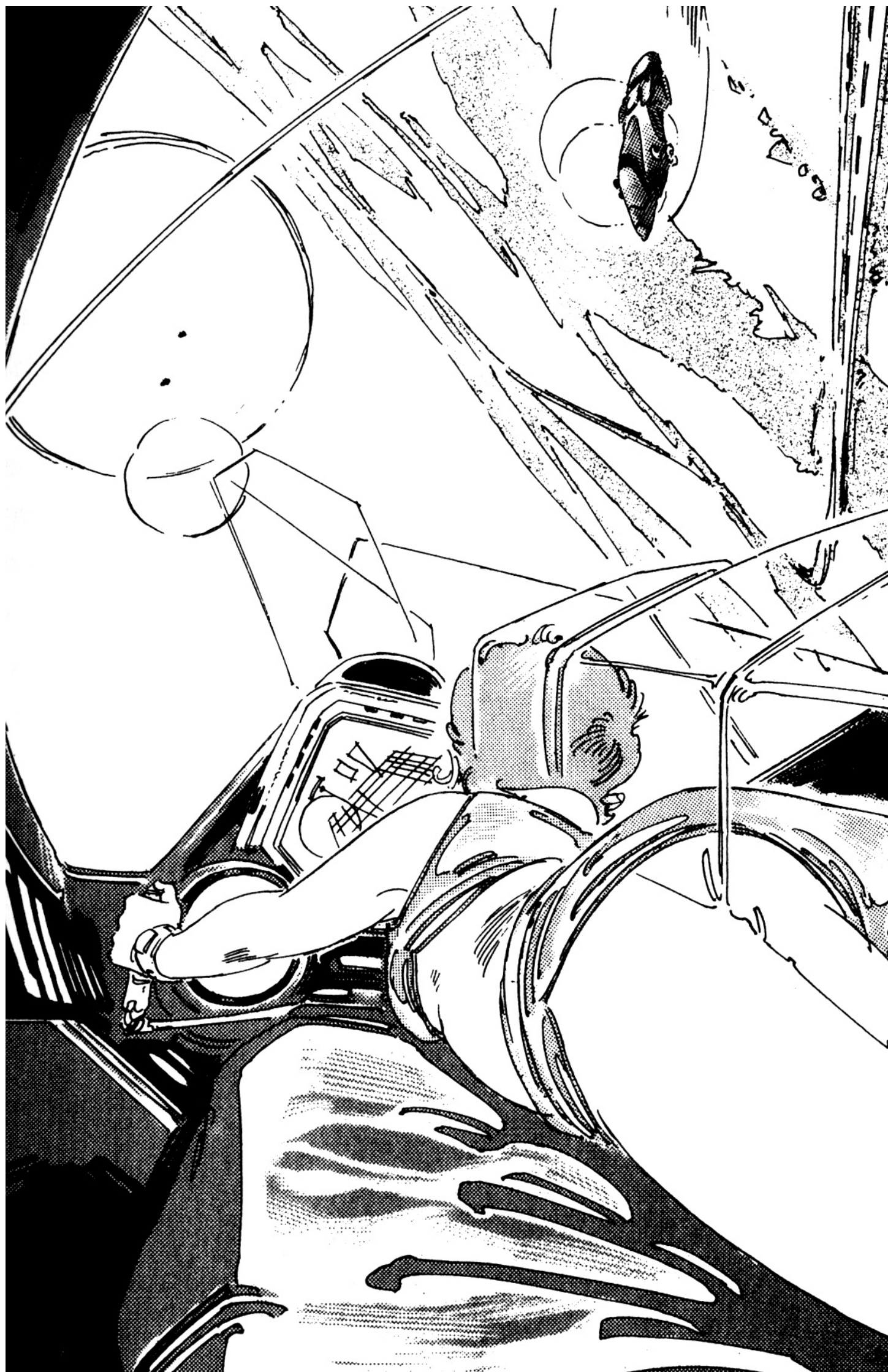
But it did force them to pause their concentrated attack on Yuri.

All at once she dropped her altitude like a rock.

The shadows split up to the left and right. One went to follow Yuri and the other set his sights on me. What do you know? That's exactly what I wanted them to do.

I slowly rotated my Shooter around. At the same time I flew in an arc and lowered my altitude. Below me was an ocean of lime green. The vast expanse of the grassy plains seemed to go on forever. It looked like a giant park. Just a little way away from the highway, there should be no people around.

I unleashed a torrential attack. Blasted from my Shooter, the atmosphere was transformed into a thick wall, flying horizontally at my enemy—at least that's what it looked like. The recoil sent my Shooter around 500 meters to the left. In front of me I could see waves heaving through the green savannah. The earth split, and I saw the brown of the raw soil break through the divided grass. Underbrush and shrubs were lifted and broke apart, fluttering in the air. It wasn't possible to see how far the tear in the green felt-like surface below extended.



I stayed my course. With all the bravery I could muster, I didn't waver off target. If I were to change course now, it would be easier for the shadow to counterattack. I wasn't going to strike and run, strike and run any longer. The only problem was that somewhere in that grassy plain was Mugi. If this shadow and I start a dogfight, it would be a pretty even match. Best-case scenario is a simultaneous strike. Worst-case scenario is I lose. But then there's Mugi. If I could add Mugi into the equation, everything changes. The odds swing drastically into our favor.

The ground grew close. I slowly steadied the nose of the flyer. The Shooter went into a sort of spiral and my eyes were spinning. Blue sky, green field, blue grass, green field... The view in front of me was different moment-to-moment. Altitude one hundred meters... eighty meters... seventy meters... Every so often I would see the shadow in my rear-view screen. He was close. If I popped the hatch, I could probably have grabbed him.

A gauge suddenly started blinking brightly. Without any warning. Sudden disorder. For a moment I thought the flyer was in full shutdown. But that wasn't it. There was a reason for this abnormal blinking light.

It was Mugi. Mugi can control electrical and electromagnetic currents. Even from a little ways away, he has the power. Make no mistake. This abnormality was a message from Mugi.

I pulled the lever toward me.

Sudden ascend. This was my reply to Mugi's message. The Shooter was pointed straight up. The main engine was fully opened. This G-force was going to crush me. My muscles began to tremble. My chest felt tight. Aah! My beautiful boobs would get...

My Shooter swung around. Turning on a dime, she was now facing the opposite direction. The shadow was there. He was a little blip in the center of my screen.

This shadow was shaking. More than his speed, it was hard to distinguish him from the surface of the planet he was now on. I wasn't going to miss this.

Mugi aimed straight for the shadow and jumped from the grass. The shadow

that had fallen from high in the sky had apparently been within Mugi's range. Mugi, who had sent his message and driven me away, had attacked from below as the shadow was occupied with trying to get my Shooter.

The shadow was helpless against the unexpected attack.

Sensing imminent death, the shadow tried to escape from Mugi's claws and fangs. I banked around and dropped my altitude.

The shadow rose unsteadily. He had none of the speed or vitality of a few moments previous.

He hobbled to right opposite me.

His image filled my targeting screen.

The shadow tore off his armor in pieces, and a faint trail of smoke lifted. An LED-designated HIT in bright letters. I pressed down on the trigger button.

Two rounds of fire blew out of my twin blasters.

The red flames slammed into the shadow. The shadow couldn't counter. I only showed a little of what these blasters could do, but these balls of fire were more than enough.

The shadow was enveloped in flames. I don't give light sentences. I continued to fire the blaster.

As I expected, the scene before my eyes turned a bright, pure white.

A shockwave rocked the Shooter. Then came the roar. Even through the canopy, my eardrums instantly started to ring, the explosion was so enormous. The flash was blinding. I closed my eyes. But even then, it wasn't dark. All I saw was the red brightness emitting from the back of my eyelids. The canopy is tinted with a reflective covering, but it had absolutely no effect.

Keeping my eyes closed, I increased my altitude, again. The bright light disappeared. With a little hesitation, I slowly opened my eyes. There was the ultramarine tone of the blue sky. At first I thought the flash of the explosion still remained, but then I realized it was because my ship was pointed at the sun.

I turned the lever, spinning to go back to where the shadow had been. But where he had stood moments before there was nothing. No rubble, no fire, not

even any smoke.

That was one hell of an explosion. It must have been some kind of suicide bomb planted in the armor again, and like the shopping plaza, there was no evidence anything ever existed in that spot. It's a good thing this happened away from the city in the grasslands.

I started looking for the last shadow. He needed to be taken care of around here, too. Who knows what would happen if he was able to escape back into outer space.

I stared at the radar screen for a full four seconds.

There were two blips darting dizzyingly across the monitor. They weren't far off. Surprisingly, they were high above ground. It seemed that Yuri was counterattacked, and she'd tried to get away by going up.

"Let's end this here!" I spat.

I pulled the lever to me as hard as I could.

My Shooter swooped up into the air.

8

It was at an altitude of about two thousand meters where I found Yuri and the last shadow entangled. As I had expected, the one-on-one match between a shadow and a Shooter was a pretty even match. I had the slightest impression that Yuri might be getting knocked around more. The shadow tended to keep finding his way behind Yuri's Shooter. If you had to ask, I would say that Yuri was on the defensive.

I came from below at full throttle. I aimed for the shadow's back. If I could pull it off perfectly, the shadow would be smack between Yuri's and my blasters.

I let loose with the blasters to create a screen, and in one breath I was caught up at the same altitude. My plan was unfolding perfectly. Seeing me appear

from out of nowhere, the shadow appeared obviously confused. He apparently didn't know that his two partners were now just a couple of memories. In a haphazard attempt to shake us, the shadow started to climb higher in the sky. Don't even try it, bub! Take a hint. You aren't going anywhere.

Yuri turned her Shooter around. She was pointed at the shadow across from me, our enemy right between us. This was perfect. No matter what, it's over.

Yuri and I had the shadow pinned. It was a showdown from two directions, and we were slowly closing in on the shadow rotating in a spiral.

The kill was only a matter of time.

If possible, I wanted this one alive. I had a little time to think about it.

Then something happened.

The last thing I needed at that moment was about to interrupt us.

"Kei!" Yuri called to me through the communicator. It sounded desperately urgent.

"They're coming up from below!" Yuri more screamed than said.

"The Danp Yu Air Defense!"

Eep!

I tried to look under the Shooter. Holy... she wasn't kidding. Their timing couldn't have been worse.

Flustered, I glanced at the radar.

"!"

I lost my voice.

They were coming up.

What looked like a squadron of Air Defense fighters was making its way up through the sky. There were twenty blips—no, make that thirty blips. You idiots, if you all come together in a group like that then I can't use my blasters.

Lyonesse is a WWWW planet, so there is no real organized police department. Instead they use United Space Force troops as Air Defense and station them at

major space ports. If something happens on Lyonesse, the TCs at the WWWW Headquarters or the Air Defense take care of it. Somehow the Air Defense got a tip for the WWWW HQ, and without confirming it with us, sent their fighters here. In reality, they were just going to get in the way. The weak Air Defense fighters wouldn't even be able to see the damn shadow. Before one of them could respond if he caught a glance at it, the shadow would be gone, off in a different direction. This was simply bad luck, and before these guys could get their heads screwed on straight, they would all be toasted metal strewn on the ground.

I was about to hail the Air Defense commanding officer, and scream at him to turn his troops around and get away from here.

But I didn't get the opportunity.

The shadow noticed the Air Defense fighters approaching.

Instead of trying to escape in a zigzag pattern, the shadow flew down directly toward them.

In a moment's time he had disappeared from my field of vision.

Chk. He definitely saw them coming.

Yuri and I pushed down on our respective levers. The Air Defense had no right to complain about whatever happened next. For now, we needed to catch up to the shadow. Just as we had him, now we had to send our Shooters down to chase him again. Plunging toward the earth, we made our pursuit. I was just a little closer than Yuri to the shadow. Nothing more than a targeting check, I pressed the trigger button. I never do anything just halfway. If I couldn't bring the shadow down before he used the Air Defense forces as a shield, then he would surely get away.

Several fireballs skimmed the shadow. None of them were a killing blow. Not only were we still too far off, another problem was that the targeting sight was off. I was hoping for a lucky shot, but it wasn't happening. That wasn't the right approach to taking the shadow down, anyway.

The Air Defense fighters were drawing close to the shadow. Not good. Soon I wouldn't be able to fire my blasters.

“Move! You’re in the way! Go home!”

I could hear Yuri’s angry rant rattle through the communicator. Since I was busy flying and firing my blasters, Yuri had taken over my usual role of delivering the angry tirade.

But the fighters acted as if they couldn’t hear us. The formation then spread out, trying to entrap the shadow. At a snail’s pace. Hey! You are too slow!

The shadow was so fast that by the time they saw him, he was already within their weapons range.

In unison we took an almost right angle turn.

The Air Defense fighter ships would not be able to follow these movements. With a slip the shadow blew past the fighters and us in the opposite direction. The shadow climbed straight back to a higher altitude. I wasn’t able to fire any longer. If I did it was more than likely I would be knocking Air Defense fighters out of the sky. I actually didn’t have a problem with that, but the punishment wouldn’t have been worth it.

Now what? The Air Defense fighters began turning around.

Yuri and I tried to contact them on the wireless, but got no response. Without releasing any fire, they turned to begin to follow the shadow again. Couldn’t they see they were just in the way?

The shadow eased up on his speed. He could see that the Air Defense was trying to follow him. Without dropping from the high altitude, he was luring the Air Defense up. Dammit. As worthless as they were, he planned to use the Air Defense as a shield. It was quite a distance from the ground, so Mugi wouldn’t be able to help.

“Kei!” Yuri called to me.

“The space port fuel base is five kilos away.”

Wha—?!

All the hair on my body stood on end. Could it be, was he trying to lure them there?

“I think he’s figured out that he can’t just get away,” said Yuri. Her tone sure

was calm. You know, her panic level never seems to match the situation.

“Yuri...,” I said.

“I am almost out of fuel, but I will get him. I will pass up the Air Defense at full speed and, if I have to, slam into him. I gotta get this asshole. The rest I’ll leave to you.”

“Kei!” Yuri shrieked.

I turned the main engine power up to MAX.

The Shooter accelerated up like a bolt shot from a crossbow.

9

It began to feel like a giant hammer was trying to pound its way out of my head. I was beginning to see spots and was feeling faint. I steadied myself and glared at the gauge.

I muscled my way past the Air Defense squadron. It was a miracle I didn’t crash into any of them.

The shadow appeared in the middle of the view screen. Beyond him I could see the fuel base tanks.

I grasped the targeting lever tightly. I only had one chance. If I missed, I was done for. My palms were sweaty. I stared at the targeting screen through my blurring vision. The fuel light started blinking brightly, and a loud beep sounded. At this acceleration, I had thirty seconds before I would no longer be able to fly. I cut my altitude at eight hundred meters. My targeting screen was a white frame where two entities were about to converge. Almost there. Almost to the target spot.

And then—

Suddenly the gauges went nuts. They weren’t working right. They were all putting out nonsense. Not one single meter was correct. The targeting screen was now just static, and was no use to me. I didn’t know my altitude or

direction.

The control lever stopped responding. My acceleration immediately dropped.

The Shooter suddenly did a 180 degree turn. I felt a strong G pull from my lower back down. The horizon disappeared from my field of vision. The blue sky was gone.

“That damn son-of-a—”

My blood was boiling. This was Mugi. Mugi was doing this. He’s the only one who could manipulate my ship like this.

At least that was my opinion.

The shadow exploded.

I was bathed in a white light. My ears erupted with the roar of the explosion. The shooter was thrown off balance, and was sent spinning like a drill bit. I had no control over the flyer. The Shooter stalled.

Again, a shockwave plowed through the air. But not just one. A second, then a third came in succession. The last one was about a million times louder than the first, a truly devastating sound.

What was this? What did it mean...?

No time to think. I was plummeting to the ground.

I pulled the lever back with all my strength, tossing out the vernier scale. Now! All at once, the Shooter leveled out.

Waa!

I was in shock. The bottom of the ship slid over the tips of the blades of grass. I closed my eyes and fiddled with my vernier scale.

I was tossed up with a bump. The Shooter hit something. Its midsection had hit the ground. It could technically be called an emergency landing, but was probably closer to a crash landing.

The Shooter glided over a kilometer on the green grass. The engine was not only dead, but in several pieces.

Luckily, since there was no fuel, there was no fire. With most of the fuselage

torn off, the Shooter came to a stop. Basically all that was left was the cockpit, but I wasn't hurt badly.

For the moment, I couldn't move. I was barely conscious.

Yuri's Shooter came sliding in next to mine. Hers was a true emergency landing. There was no major damage to her ship.

"Kei!"

I could hear her voice through the communicator. Apparently the communicator had a back-up battery.

"It's all clear," I replied. I then sprung open the canopy.

My upper half woke up, and to stretch my muscles I twisted my body.

I couldn't move.

My blood ran cold.

It was burning. The fuel base was engulfed in gigantic crimson flames! Half of the horizon was a bright red. Here and there new explosions occurred.

"A bunch of the Air Defense fighters crashed and burned," Yuri commented over the communicator.

"They were in formation when the shockwave hit, so they crashed into each other. It's because the shadow was luring the Air Force and us in. That was his target."

To make a long story short, he sacrificed himself in an effort to kill us. Sensing this course of events, Mugi knocked my Shooter out of danger's path. However the highly concentrated formation of Air Defense fighters weren't so lucky.

"Now what do we do?" asked Yuri.

What do we do? The fuel base is destroyed. A disaster like this?! What can we do?!

"I'll ask the chief," I said.

"Is the chief still alive?"

"If we call him, we can see."

I grabbed the communicator and entered the calling code for the department chief.

“—is Soranaka.”

Surprisingly, the chief answered. How stubborn! How gruff! He had almost died!

“This is Kei, sir,” I let him know. This communicator doesn’t have a video screen.

“Why, you—!” The chief’s voice suddenly changed. There was a tension-filled high-pitched crackle now.

“What happened? Or should I ask, what disaster have you initiated?” he asked, hastily.

“Nothing...,” I responded.

“The shadows were suicide bombers.”

“Which is why Danp Yu is in crisis and the fuel base is going up in flames?”

“Correct, sir.”

“Enough!” the chief yelled, almost loud enough to break the communicator.

“Get out of here! Now! Even though the space port is shut down, I will make a special exception for the departure of *Lovely Angel*. Get your ass to Chakra. And don’t come back! Get the hell away from Lyonesse!”

Crackle.

The communicator cut off.

I tried to hail him again, but there was no answer.

“Kei...”

The voice called from behind me. It was Yuri. She had unlatched her canopy and was looking at me.

“Let’s do what he says.”

I shrugged my shoulders. I agreed with that way of thinking. Maybe if we followed orders without putting up a fuss he would eventually cool down.

“Mgyaa...”

Mugi gave a murmur from somewhere. All of a sudden he popped up and laid his front paws on what was left of my Shooter, his big jet-black face came from out of nowhere as he gave a yelp.

“You did it, you big furball!”

I stroked Mugi’s neck. Mugi purred with satisfaction, and his feelers drooped as he drew in closer to me.

“The space port is that way,” said Yuri as she popped out of her Shooter and pointed north. It was beyond the fuel base, which was completely enshrouded in thick flame.

“C’mon, Mugi,” I said. “I called an air car, but for some reason it hasn’t come.”

“I know...,” said Yuri, nodding.

We climbed onto Mugi’s back.

It really was a depressing scene.

We got out of warp.

After everything that had happened, we got on our way to Chakra.

Thinking about it, we really got some nasty looks at the space port. In the middle of all the chaos when we went to the counter and said our code name, "*Lovely Angel*" all of the customs officials, as well as about thirty other staff suddenly vanished. As we were trying to get processed we were bombarded with wordless, hate-filled glares. The staff connected to the fuel base especially looked at us like the fuel base explosion was our fault. I am not kidding.

And then after that, the walk to the gate wasn't any better. All the grounded pilots and flight attendants told all the travel agencies and passengers they could blame us for the delays. Why us? Who is fueling these baloney rumors?! We were just about on our last nerve. Yuri was about to cry, (though past history would suggest that she wouldn't really cry), and I was so incensed that I had to do everything I could to not seriously hurt somebody, causing some serious stomach upset (I did knock down two or three people, though). If you had known what we really went through with those damn shadows you'd be a little nicer to us!

And while I was exasperated with rage, Chakra grew close.

Chakra was a planet without night. This was because there were two suns. The position of the planet between the red giant and blue and white dwarf rotating around each other meant that when one sun's day in the sky ended, the other sun's began. There are some areas where both suns shine down at the same time. Usually you wouldn't expect people to move to a place like that, but Chakra is an unsophisticated mining planet rich with radokite and the rare

element buddijium. After Mandala took control over Chakra, only people associated with mining and such emigrated there. From what I understand, because of that Chakra has some unique laws of self-governance. For example, it is written that portable weapons can be carried freely. Hmm, I was getting a bad feeling about this.

Lovely Angel locked into orbit over Chakra. From here, it looks like a relatively small planet. Its diameter is 7,800 kilometers. The standard gravity is 0.87G. The sea to land ratio is five-to-one, so there really isn't a whole lot of dry land.

Chakra has no relay station, so all immigration procedures are done on the ground from a control tower. I was imagining a young, good-looking hunk for our examiner, but no such luck. The examination was done by a computer system. Oh, well. It isn't an independent planet-state, anyway. It's basically a mine on the outskirts of the galaxy run by another planet-state. That's the most reasonable way to look at it.

Out of boredom I tried to get the examination over with as quickly as possible so we could get *Lovely Angel* on the ground. *Lovely Angel* is our ship exclusively, and she's named after our codename. Normally we are not referred to by our regular codename, but are better known by our absolutely ghastly nickname, "Dirty Pair."

Lovely Angel is nose-to-tail 80 meters, a long, skinny spindle-shaped vertical-type spaceship. She has two large fins and two smaller fins attached to her body, and she comes in a little at the waist. She has a brilliant scarlet paint job. Anyone seeing her can immediately tell she's our ship. That's why at space ports no one comes near us. It's kind of depressing, actually. Breaking through the stratosphere, and then through some light cloud cover, *Lovely Angel* continued down toward the planet's surface. Piloting the ship is Yuri's job, so after the immigration check I didn't have anything I needed to do. I eased my seat back and played with Mugi's paws.

"Almost there," said Yuri.

The main screen blacked out when we entered the atmosphere, but then it flickered back to life. The cone-shaped *Lovely Angel* has no windows in the control deck. Instead there are dozens of screens, big and small, lined up on the

walls that let us see what's going on outside.

What we saw on the main screen now was an overhead view of Chakra's biggest continent, Bassara. The red giant sun, Indola, was shining down now, so the continent of Bassara looked as if it were dyed with a reddish-brown ink. Aslaville is almost in the deadcenter of Bassara. That's near where the space port was, so that's where we were headed for landing.

Yuri concentrated seriously on her flying as she took us down through the atmosphere. Even though I was in relax mode, I kept an eye out on the view screens and stayed on guard. Especially after the looks we got leaving Lyonesse. Who knew how they would respond to us here on Chakra?

But as it turned out, there was nothing to be concerned about.

Lovely Angel docked safely at the Aslaville space port. Small and dusty, it seemed more like a cargo port than a real transportation hub. On top of that, most of the ships resting around the landing pad were of the large-size container cargo variety.

We docked our ship in the port and rented a car. This was all automated. We dealt with almost no actual people. It was kind of weird, but better than dealing with a bunch of stuffy old codgers. I held my patience.

What I couldn't keep quiet about was the car. It wasn't an air car. There were like, wheels on it. Six of them! It had a solid-looking body, and all, but it had not a single part emoting grace or elegance. It was a real backwoods utility vehicle. To make matters even worse, it was slow. No matter how hard you hit the accelerator, its highest speed was two hundred kilometers per hour. Well, it's not like this was a planet with well-maintained highways. Actually, this was probably the kind of car we needed. An air car would probably get blown off the road with all the uneven, bumpy streets. Even still, I preferred a faster, sleeker vehicle.

I was the one to drive to downtown Aslaville. It was only forty kilometers away, but it took us over ten minutes to get there. This must be a record. A proper highway is a real must. Why didn't anyone think of that?

After getting into Aslaville, Yuri turned on the auto-navi from the passenger seat. It was one that you could use to search destinations.

Yuri broke the silence with a question.

“Where is it that we are going?”

I died right on the spot. It was after I died that I remembered. We didn’t know where we were going yet.

Yuri and Mugi died.

We wanted to find Landis, the engineer who’d been bitten by the invisible fangs, to hear his story, but his whereabouts weren’t included in the data we received from the WWWA. I wanted to contact the Headquarters and chew them out, but I just didn’t quite have the courage to face the chief yet.

For the time being, we went to the center of Aslaville to retrace the steps that led up to the attack. It was an optimistic investigative approach, but sometimes it led to results. Anyway, there wasn’t much point in quickly solving the case and rushing home before things cooled down a bit.

After driving for a while we entered what looked like a shopping district. Actually, it was probably downtown. There were many garishly decorated stores lined up next to each other, and a shady-looking crowd of people moved up and down the street. This may have been the area where Landis’ leg was bitten.

I let up on the gas and took a long look around the scene there. Since the sun was always out, I didn’t know if it was day or night, but looking at the clock on the dashboard, I saw it was early evening. In a mining town, the time of day when things start to get a little wild. But it was too bright, so maybe not.

“Why don’t we stop over there and take a little stroll?” I asked Yuri.

“Sounds good to me,” Yuri said, showing her approval.

I pulled to the side of the road and opened my door.

—and just as I did...

I was struck by a beam.

In the blink of an eye I threw myself to the street. From my holster I drew my heatgun. Pulling out her ray gun, Yuri jumped from the car. Mugi followed right after. The beam grazed the base of the car door and left a burn.

Across the street was a crowd of people. In the middle of the crowd was a man standing, aiming a ray gun.

It's him. He's the shooter.

I held my heatgun in front of me, pointed it at the man, and took off toward him. Pushing my way through the crowd, I closed in on him.

"Hold it!"

Somebody grabbed my shoulder. I turned my body, knocking the hand off my body. I lifted the heatgun looking for the face of my assailant.

My breath was caught in my throat. Fireworks started exploding in my head.

I—I couldn't believe it. I really couldn't believe my eyes. All my strength slipped away from my body. What was standing before me was Apollo... or was it Adonis? ...Whatever. Either way he was fantasy-level handsome!

The face of a virile young man. Thick manly eyebrows. A long straight nose. Nice thin lips. Bright, clear eyes. Golden strands of blond hair poked out from under his ten-gallon hat. How could I choose my favorite part?

"I don't want you to stop him," said Handsome, lifting the brim of his hat with two fingers. He spoke with a clear, deep voice. His smile gleamed a row of shiny, perfect, pearl-colored teeth.

"That was a legitimate weapons discharge."

Fine. I had already forgotten my name. Anything was fine. I'd listen to anything he had to say!

2

Handsome's name was Jeff. Age twenty-five. What I was most surprised to hear was that he was the sheriff of Aslaville. He wasn't a police officer. He was a ranking officer in a vigilante group. Aslaville's infrastructure isn't exactly complete, so citizens were responsible for protecting themselves. That's why there were no restrictions on guns and when they couldn't settle a situation on

their own, they went to the sheriff. That's why the citizens chose Jeff as the best man for the job. Oh, and they were so right! This kind of gorgeous man could do no wrong. I mean, I would elect him for sheriff, too. Though I really didn't know anything about him, besides the fact that he was hot.

Learning we were WWWA Crime TCs, Jeff took us to his office to give us a tour. Truthfully, I wanted to go with Jeff to his office by myself, but I couldn't really leave Yuri and Mugi to loiter around by the car. I had to let them come, too. I made sure to set the ground rules with Yuri. Jeff was mine. I saw him first.

Yuri was quiet and hunched over at the news.

His office was on the first floor of a small building. The structure itself looked pretty flimsy, but naturally it had a solid-looking door.

There were no windows facing the street. That's how they make a sheriff's office.

We parked right out in front, and Jeff led us into his office. It was a small space cramped with Jeff's desk, a sofa, a gun locker, and a data console filling up the room. But it didn't seem disorganized or cluttered. This must have reflected Jeff's personality. He knew how to clean up after himself.

The far wall was transparent. On the other side was a small room with a bed. On the bed a red-faced old man lay asleep, snoring loudly.

"That's the detention cell," said Jeff.

The old man had passed out in front of the Sheriff's office stonedrunk around lunchtime, and the only option was to toss him in the cell, Jeff told us. He was so nice. The see-through wall was bulletproof glass, ten centimeters thick. Naturally the holding cell didn't have any windows, either.

Jeff directed us to the couch. He took a seat in a chair in front of his desk and casually crossed his long legs. Oh baby... he could do no wrong in my eyes. He really looked like a movie star.

"You really took me by surprise earlier," I said, selecting my words carefully.

"I thought you were trying to kill us," Yuri sputtered out. I pretended to adjust my seating as I elbowed Yuri in the kidney. Yuri kept quiet.

“I really should apologize,” said Jeff. “Here shoot-outs are forgivable. As are pursuits with the sheriff. It’s my job to make sure things don’t get out of hand, like the beam that clipped you, and that’s my fault. I didn’t do my job. I am sorry. That’s all I can tell you.”

Jeff bowed his head. I reflexively did the same.

“No, no, it’s all right. I wasn’t hurt. And thanks to that we were able to meet each other. I consider it a stroke of good luck.”

Jeff beamed an invigorating smile. Oh, so nice. That grinning face made my heart throb.

“So, about this guy, Landis, do you know where we could find him?” Yuri piped in.

Are you—Are you completely nuts? Did you forget who called dibs on him? I ask the questions. He is with me. I am also the one who gets to gaze at him. Pull it together, you dizzy birdbrain!

I went to pound Yuri’s side with my elbow. But Yuri was no amateur. She amazingly anticipated my move and leaned forward. My elbow met air, and the momentum of my missed strike knocked me off balance. Unh... how embarrassing.

Fortunately Jeff was deep in thought over the answer to Yuri’s question, and didn’t notice my failed attack. Thank heavens! Nothing to be ashamed of.

“Since the WWWA has been called in, this seems to be quite a big deal. But unfortunately, I don’t know anything about what happened,” said Jeff, lifting his head after a few moments of consideration.

“I don’t know Landis personally, but if I look his name up, I should be able to find him. After my night patrol, I will try and track him down.”

“Really? But, you must be so busy...” I said, setting my balled hands under my chin and opening my eyes as big as I could. From behind me Yuri didn’t say a word, but from the tremble in her shoulders I got her message. Hey, little lady, I’ll take care of this when we have a minute alone, just the two of us.

“No, it’s all right,” said Jeff, lifting two fingers and shaking them in the air

lightly.

“It’s the least I could do after all that’s happened.”

And on top of everything, what a sense of honor!

“But I can’t help but wonder who it was that reported this mysterious incident to the WWWA...,” Jeff thought out loud, tilting his head.

“If we knew that, then we could probably learn more about Landis.”

“It was the Aslaville mayor that made the request,” I said. It wasn’t any secret that the mayor was the person who’d asked for the investigation to take place.

“So this isn’t a private matter, but a government investigation.”

The WWWA isn’t an interplanetary police force. And it isn’t a special unit of the United Space Force, either. It’s an organization of Trouble Consultants. With the freedom to land and depart from any of the United Galactica planet-states at will, and with complete freedom in how we conduct our investigations and what weapons we carry where, we resolve the missions as we are assigned. Perhaps, moreover, the advice we get before we arrive depends on the information we get from the people at the actual case location. This function exists for mankind’s benefit, and that concept exists for the prosperity, or more simply, the welfare of humankind throughout space. That is why it is named the Worlds Welfare Work Association.

Cases to the WWWA are mainly brought on by individual governments. Often an incident happens and the local authorities are overwhelmed or at a dead end in the case.

When a new case arrives it is given a thorough examination through United Galactica’s Central Computer. Every angle and detail is researched completely, and if there are still questions remaining, an appropriate TC is selected and dispatched to the location of the incident. If it is related to economics, then an Economics TC is dispatched, a medical issue merits a Medical TC, and a police case means Crime TCs like us are called. But this case didn’t really appear to be a police case. This was more of a job for an exorcist.

“Even if the mayor made the request, I certainly hadn’t heard anything about this case,” said Jeff.

“What do you mean?” I asked, not understanding what he meant.

“In this town, the mayor and the town people aren’t exactly connected well.”

Jeff added just a slightly stronger intonation on his last sentence.

3

“Actually, it’s me,” said Jeff, pointing a finger at himself.

“I was elected by the town people to be the sheriff, but I am a civilian. I wasn’t appointed by the mayor. The mayor has his own investigation team. But it has nothing to do with the town’s residents.”

“That’s a really complicated situation,” said Yuri, then holding her breath. It seemed like an attempt to usurp my position, but, well, I would let this one go. I was thinking the same thing when she said it.

“Ever since the special law was passed requiring citizens to carry portable arms, this separation was inevitable.”

Jeff’s expression became cloudy. It was right then when it happened. The clock on his desk let out a soft tone.

“It’s time,” said Jeff, turning off the alarm as he stood from his desk.

“I need to go on patrol now. I’ll be back in about an hour, if you can wait for me.”

“I’d love to go with you,” I said, standing immediately.

“I hate to have to apologize, but if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather go alone. It’s just that, well, if you can’t take no for an answer then you could bend my arm, as it doesn’t sound like you feel like sitting around waiting for me to come back. But, I would like to talk to you more once I’m done with patrol,” said Jeff getting ready, and then he walked out of the office. Who remained was me, Yuri, Mugi, and a loudly snoring old man. I couldn’t imagine a more boring situation to be stuck in.

I picked up a magazine that was lying nearby. Then, looking closely, I saw that

all the books and magazines in the room were law-enforcement related. Just looking at the covers started to give me a headache. Jeff was handsome, but, this got me thinking.

With nothing better to do, I laid down on the couch using Mugi as a pillow, considering taking a little nap.

And then it happened.

“Ladies...,” resounded a gloomy voice, coming from where I wasn’t sure.

I popped up from my horizontal position with no delay. Yuri, who had been reading the news on the reader, looked around confused.

“It’s me. Over here,” a voice said from behind us.

The old man, who until a few moments ago was snoring behind the bulletproof glass, was now glaring straight at us.

It was this old man who had spoken.

“What are you trying to do?! Don’t scare us like that!” I said, spitting fire. But the old man didn’t seem to hear my reaction.

“You all, you said you were WWWA TCs, huh?” he said, not seeming to hear me.

“So you weren’t asleep. You were eavesdropping on us?” I said, ignoring his question.

“I wasn’t trying to listen, but that’s what I heard,” said the oldster.

“You want to know some things about Landis, right? Leave it to me. I can tell you about the mayor, the owner, the master, all those guys.”

“You have info? You know about the Landis case?”

“What did I just say?!”

“Let’s hear what you’ve got!” I said, walking up to the bulletproof glass.

“There are conditions...”

“What conditions?”

“I want you to protect me.”

“Protect you? From who?”

“From everyone. I know about everything, so everyone has it out for me. Listen. Until three days ago, I had never had a drop of alcohol in my life. Today I drank so much I got tossed in here. You know why?”

“It’s dangerous, and no one can get you in here?”

“I am happy someone understands.”

“If what you are saying isn’t just some drunken rambling and is the actual truth, I’ll protect you to all ends of the planet,” I told him. “Can you prove it?”

“I guess I am stuck,” said the old man, shaking his head. “If that’s the way it has to be, I’ll give you one juicy tidbit of info. Now come closer and listen up.”

The old man gestured us closer with his hand. I was about to put my ear up to the glass.

But I never was able to hear the valuable secret.

All I heard was the gigantic boom of a huge explosion.

At the same time a shockwave rumbled the floor of the police station.

I was thrown into the air and then rolled across the floor.

“Kei! Outside!” Yuri called in a loud voice. She had avoided being thrown by the shockwave by clinging to the sofa. Mugi’s ear-like matted whiskers were vibrating. The door opened. Smoke and flames billowed into the sheriff’s office. In a flash, Mugi dashed out through the door. Yuri followed. Don’t just leave me here! I hurriedly stood up and started to run.

I made it outside.

In front of me was a pile of mangled metal. I nearly crashed headfirst into it, and almost didn’t stop my feet in time. It was our car. The clunker we’d ridden in from the space port had exploded, and was now nothing but a pile of smoldering steel.

“Who? Who would do such a...” Yuri muttered. That was the essential question.

We heard a shout. It sounded like the cry of an elderly man. It was coming

from inside the sheriff's office!

"Dammit!"

I turned around.

I went back into the sheriff's office.

"Hu—!"

I stood in shock.

"Aa."

Yuri was also frozen in mid-step.

The floor of the detention cell had turned to a giant puddle of red. The thick blood slowly spread out across the floor, and in the center of the pool was the old man slumped forward, face down.

Mugi stepped in front of us. Again, he vibrated the fine hair where his ears should be. Without a sound, the bulletproof glass of the cell began to rise up. Yuri and I rushed to the old man's side.

"His throat..." said Yuri. "It's been bitten and torn out."

Yuri was right. The trained eye could tell by looking at the wound. The old man had not been killed by any gun or blade. He was bitten by an unidentified animal, which had proceeded to pull and tear out the flesh.

"But...", I said, looking around the room. "This room is completely impenetrable."

There were no windows in the outside walls or ceiling. No holes had opened up anywhere. And this was done by an animal...

Besides Mugi, no animal was that intelligent.

4

Someone must have let him know. Less than ten minutes after the explosion, Jeff returned to the sheriff's office. It was just about the time we were getting

over the shock of the murdered body in the cell, and were thinking about examining our exploded vehicle.

Dozens of onlookers had squeezed in to take a peek from outside the sheriff's office. Jeff had to push his way through the crowd of townspeople before he could return to his own office. His hat was a bit bent, and the collar of his shirt was opened up, revealing a good part of his chest. The tension caused a small part on the cheeks of his chiseled face to turn white, and his expression was hard to read. However, there was a sharp sparkle in his pupils, though his lips were pursed tightly. Without speaking, he looked quite brave, and these sorts of events seem to bring out the best look in him. Oh yeah, I had completely forgotten about the incident and was just staring at Jeff.

"What in the hell happened?" asked Jeff, looking around at his office which was ravaged by the blast. Right in front of him a one-meter diameter puddle of blood had formed. In it lay the old man whose neck was bitten and torn apart.

"There was an explosion..." Yuri said, butting in. Gazing upon Jeff, I had opened up the door for Yuri to pipe in unnecessarily one more time.

Within a split second, I was on the move.

"Jeff—"

I did a little spin and gracefully staggered over to him. I pretended to be a sensitive girl, weak from the sight of the bloody mess. Well, it wasn't a total fake-out. I really am a sensitive girl!

Knocking Yuri down in the process, I reached my hands out to Jeff.

"Be careful, there!"

Jeff's firm and powerful arms reached out and caught me by my shoulders. Perfect. Just how I fantasized it would go. Mugi caught Yuri. That's fine. That's a better match for her, anyway.

"I'm so sorry. I was just taken aback by this terrible scene..." I said panting heavily, my voice going in and out.

"Let's lay you down on the sofa."

Jeff picked me up and carried me to the sofa. I completely let go, letting Jeff

to do with me whatever he may.

“Just take a rest for the time being,” said Jeff, looking into my eyes. Oh, very nice! This is it. This is how I want to die!

“All right, then.”

Jeff popped up and turned from me. He went to talk to Yuri.

“So let’s hear it. Tell me everything.”

No, no, no! That wasn’t how it was supposed to go! I was about to scream. But, I wasn’t in time. Having been put to rest on the sofa, there was nothing I could do about it. Jeff stood in front of Yuri.

Standing only about eighteen centimeters from each other, they began their conversation. That’s too... that’s too close. Terrible thoughts cascaded through my head.

“It happened just after you left on patrol...,” Yuri began as she glanced over in my direction with a triumphant smile spread across her face. Dammit! I bit my rosebud-like lips, and decided I would have to put up with this cold-blooded behavior from Yuri for the moment. I turned into the tragic heroine.

The torture lasted for another full five minutes. The tactless Yuri didn’t realize that other people’s things can’t be snatched so easily. I would return the favor slowly and over a long period of time. Man, this was so irritating. How she got his attention, I couldn’t understand what Jeff was thinking.

“Hm. I think I understand what happened now,” said Jeff nodding after Yuri finished her little speech. Hmph, how could she make any sense? He was probably just being polite, and planned on asking me to explain what happened later.

“So it was the car exploding that made you go outside, right?”

“That’s absolutely right,” said Yuri. “I am not sure how they tricked us, but whoever killed the old man didn’t want us to see it happen.”

“And on top of that they didn’t leave any room for error.”

“Right.”

Yuri and Jeff both looked straight at each other. What in the world was going on?! This was no joke. This couldn't be happening.

Losing my patience, I sat up. Enough. No more sensitive girl.

"Jeff!" I called out. I don't think he noticed the sharp tone in which I said it.

"Kei!" he called out in return.

"Are you all right? How are you feeling?" he asked kindly.

That's right. You need to talk nice. The kind words of the world were meant to be used when talking to me.

"I'm okay now."

I stood up and planted myself right between Yuri and Jeff. And that was in an eighteen centimeter space. I gave Yuri a push with my shoulder and hip slyly, and she didn't say a word.

"Say," I said to Jeff, in the sweetest voice I could muster. "Who was that old man? He said he was the owner or manager of something but I couldn't really understand him. Is it true he got that drunk in order to get sent to the detention cell?"

"Now, hold... hold on here a second."

Jeff broke his silence at my barrage of questions.

"If you don't slow down, I can't give you any answers. Now let's try again, one at a time."

"I'm sorry," I apologized meekly. "I am still a little worked up..."

I shook my head as if I was frightened.

"Oh... no... it's okay," said Jeff, his face turning red. He was so cute! What a reaction!

"Well, all right. Just one question—" I said, planting my two balled fists on my chin, and extending the pointer finger of my right hand so delicately, so lovingly into the air.

"Who was that old man?"

“He was...”

Jeff’s eyes went to the corpse that lay on the floor. Hey! Hey! Don’t look away!

“He was a miner, and up until recently was the manager of Mine #16. His name was Galbaldy.”

“Same as Landis...”

They were both bitten by some mysterious creature. Without even realizing it, I slowly leaned in closer to Jeff. Oh, his gorgeous face was just right there! Should I get things started with a little kiss?

“Around here, four out of five people work in the mines. It’s harder to find someone who doesn’t, you know,” Jeff said as he shrugged his shoulders, dismissing this similarity they shared. Even though he was telling me something I already knew, it was a fact. Chakra wasn’t much more than a mining planet.

“Old Galbaldy was pretty famous around here,” Jeff continued. “He was an inquisitive old fart. He stuck his neck into everything that was going on. Then he would run around screaming and yelling about what everyone was up to. Anyone in Aslaville who didn’t know him must have been just passing though, they say.”

“He said he had his very first drink of alcohol two or three days ago,” Yuri said from over my shoulder. Gutsy. And not in a good way. Jeff’s attention shifted, and now he was looking at Yuri. I leaned my head sideways, blocking his view.

“I am not really sure, but I guess it’s possible,” said Jeff. Yuri gave up trying to stay in his line of vision, and I propped my head back straight up.

“We probably put up three or four folks a night here, but this was the first time for the old man.”

“He thought someone was out to get him,” I told Jeff.

“That’s impossible,” denied Jeff firmly. “That’s why I am so shocked at what happened.”

The door to the sheriff’s office opened. A couple of middle-aged men in gray uniforms walked in. Their shirts each bore a mark of a medical examiner’s

office. Jeff had just called them a few moments ago on the phone. Galbaldy's body would be taken to the hospital and an autopsy would be done. But, Aslaville didn't have anything fancy like an official autopsy department.

A wheeled stretcher was pushed into the room, its wheels squeaking as loud as a bulldozer. We stood back, giving them room. Of course, I waited right next to Jeff.

"That reminds me..., " said Jeff, whispering into my ear. "There was one piece of good news."

"Good news?"

I looked up at Jeff. Good news like, you were going to invite just me out to dinner? That you arranged a fancy dress just for me? You were going to pick out a diamond ring, just for me... ?

"You can see Landis," said Jeff.

"Really?!" Yuri and I said in chorus. It wasn't exactly what I was hoping for, but this truly was a piece of good news.

"Yeah, I just happened to run into a friend of his. He's here every night."

Jeff dug out a business card and showed it to us. It was for a nightclub.

And what he was doing there was—

"Professional wrestling?"

Yuri and I both read the print on the card, then stared at each other.

Look out wrestlers! Here we come!

5

After finishing cleaning up the sheriff's office we headed over to the nightclub named Salvatore, only to find that the matches had already started. Nightclubs are usually clean and fancy places, but we were, after all, in a rundown area of a mining town. The place was just a big watering hole. The clientele was almost

entirely miners. The rest looked like restaurant managers and maybe some government workers. Looking around, the words “high” and “class” weren’t the first to come to mind. In the center of the giant floor was a seven-by-seven-meter, four-sided ring. Tables were randomly arranged tightly around the ring. The walls to my left and right each had a giant screen set up showing different angles of the action, probably in an effort to eliminate any blind spots for the customers. The interior and furniture were all rather cheap, but they must have put some big money into those giant screens. Even now, I could see anguished wrestlers getting their necks and arms bent to extreme angles in the bigger-than-life simulcast, but of course, this wasn’t because they want the fans to be able to see every detail of the match. It was used for instant replay, because the customers were betting on the bouts. Will he endure or tap out? In a moment’s notice you could decide, and insert the appropriate card into a slit in the center of your table, and hit the button. Get it right, and you’re in the money. Get it wrong, and the money is pulled from your bank account. The important point to keep in mind is that winners are paid in cash, and losers get it taken from their account. Thanks to this system, customers can play with seemingly no end in sight, but soon they find themselves completely broke.

Stepping onto the floor, a manager soon came our way. He guided us to an open table. At first he gave a funny look when he saw Mugi, but after Jeff whispered something in his ear, he spread both hands open wide in an overly grandiose fashion, and gave up on trying to kick us out. Reading Jeff’s lips, it looked like he said the word “dirty” then something-something, but I pretended not to see. The more handsome you are, the more forgiving I get.

Salvatore was crowded. Almost completely packed. Even still, we didn’t have to wait and were taken straight to a table. This must have been because we were with Jeff. This was the manager’s way of showing respect to the town sheriff. Still, it wasn’t like we had the best seats in the house. We were just off from the center of the ring, and hardly ringside.

Before taking our seats, Yuri and I did one quick walk around the ring. We especially wanted to get a look at who was sitting closest to the ring. That’s where the regular customers would be sitting.

“What did you see?” Jeff asked as soon as we sat down. Jeff didn’t know what

Landis looked like, but we had seen a picture back at Headquarters.

“It looks like him sitting at the ringside table to the right,” I said.

“I thought so, too,” Yuri agreed.

“He has gray hair, thin eyebrows, green eyes, a scraggly goatee, and a small scar on his left cheek.”

Yuri gestured, showing me the binoculars she had pinched in her right forefinger. I thought I had pretty good vision, but this helped. I did what I could to keep an eye on him.

“I am thinking the best plan is to wait until all the fights are over, and then grab him when he tries to leave.”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” I said, shaking my head. “Let’s just pull him outside right now.”

“That’s not a good idea,” said Jeff, his expression changing. “The main event is about to start. If we disrupt that, it could cause a problem.”

“It’ll be okay. It’s not like we are arresting him. We’ll just say we want to ask him a couple questions. It’s not like he’s going to try and escape or make a scene.”

“Well, but...”

The rest of Jeff’s sentence was completely drowned out by a horrendously loud blast of music. Surprised, I looked at the stage to see that the semi-final bout was over, and the next match was about to start. It seemed that the loser in the semi-final snapped his shoulder blade. These were big money matches which they took very seriously.

The ring announcer, clad in a white tuxedo, read off the name of a wrestler in the main event.

At the same time, a hole in the floor at ringside opened up, and the wrestler rose up slowly standing on a garish and flashy mantle, brazenly pushing out his chest and flexing his muscles. The music and cheers were getting very loud.

The wrestler sprung into the ring. The mantle returned into the floor. The wrestler stood on top of the turnbuckle. He raised his fist high above his head

and extended his forefinger to the ceiling. He was a younger wrestler. And he wasn't one of the really big men, but he had a very tight and muscular physique.

"He's cute! Hey, who is he? Who is he?" Yuri asked Jeff the wrestler's name. We didn't hear what the announcer had said through all the cheering.

"Sammy Lee. He's tonight's challenger," Jeff yelled back.

The ring announcer introduced the name of another wrestler.

From the opposite corner of Sammy Lee, the champion stood in front of the ring.

He was big. I couldn't help but take a long look. No matter how you stacked it, he was big. This guy was at least two and a half meters tall. No. Taller. Saying Sammy Lee's head came to his belly button would probably be exaggerating, but he surely didn't reach the top of his shoulder.

"The Golem. He's the unbeaten champion," Jeff explained before we had a chance to ask. Unbeaten. No doubt. How do you beat a beast that huge? He looked to be about 300 kilos. I didn't even want to classify him as human. In fact, if I were a biologist, I would probably classify him under a brand new phylum, order, and species. With elephant-like speed, the champion Golem lumbered into the ring. I am not joking. The ring began to creak.

Switching places with the announcer, the referee hopped into the ring.

Calling both fighters, he gave them a list of warnings.

"This is no fun. Who would bet on this match-up? It's like an adult fighting a child," Yuri rattled.

"That's why Golem has a handicap," replied Jeff. "The odds are ten-to-one, so it's all right for Sammy Lee to go for Golem's eyes. He's also allowed to strangle. If Golem does it, he gets a foul."

Made sense. But I wasn't convinced those handicaps were going to be much help against a monster like Golem. If it was me, I'd get permission to use a hand blaster in the ring.

There was a swell in the noise from the crowd. You could really feel the

tension rising on the floor surrounding the battle that was about to begin. Each wrestler took a step away from his corner and glared at the combatant across from him. Golem's eyes were a reddish-gold color. They looked like they were about to go up in flames.

The Golem gave out a roar.

6

Sammy Lee quickly got in close. He bolted from his corner toward the opposite corner diagonally across the ring, and suddenly jumped high in the air.

As he flew up he did a turn so he was facing the opposite way. He nimbly swung his stretched-out legs.

Golem, who was standing upright at his corner, growled as he extended his hands, and leaned into Sammy Lee's leap, batting his right leg.

Sammy Lee's kick was actually a ruse. He had anticipated the swipe at his jump. With the momentum he was given by the push he wanted to grab the top rope and give a hard kick with his left foot to Golem's temple.

However, he had miscalculated.

Golem had more strength than a mere human. If a normal wrestler had countered Sammy Lee's attack, his kick return would have landed perfectly. But with Golem's swipe Sammy Lee flew like he was shot out of a rifle across the ring.

Sammy Lee landed head first on the mat. He didn't bounce. His body slumped.

Golem went on the attack.

Jumping from his corner to the collapsed Sammy Lee put Golem in a sweat.

It was the dictionary definition of a human bomber.

A three meter tall, 300 kilo slab of meat dropped from above. If something like that fell onto you directly, your internal organs would likely rupture. You

would have broken bones, and torn muscle and cartilage. You would be flattened.

Sammy Lee rolled out of the way.

Golem came crashing down just centimeters from his side.

A tremor boomed through the ground and the ring buckled. Sammy Lee escaped being crushed to death by a hair's breadth.

In no time, he had reversed his body, and seized both of Golem's legs.

Intersecting the two thick legs with his own, he locked up his legs at the place between his kneecap and his joint. He then put all of his body weight onto that point. Even an ogre feels pain. Golem shrieked like a wild beast and grabbed onto the nearest rope.

Unphased, Sammy Lee squeezed even harder. The referee did nothing.

"The rope?"

Yuri looked over to Jeff.

"That's a handicap, too. Golem doesn't get a rope break," Jeff answered quickly.

Everyone in the room was on their feet. Cheers rose from the crowd. My ears started to ring. Checking out other tables, I saw many people dropping cards into slots and hitting the Sammy Lee button excitedly. Suckers. You could be getting played. It seemed to me this fight was far from over.

Using the rope, Golem forcibly lifted his leg with Sammy Lee still attached. He hung on, but soon Sammy Lee was being dragged. Where did he find the strength? Even though his face was contorted and red as he crushed with all his might, it was no use. If this couldn't snap his knee Golem must be some kind of cyborg made of super ceramics. I mean, it just was beyond common sense.

Bending his knee and leaning over, Golem was able to reach Sammy Lee. Golem released his right hand from the rope, and went to grab Sammy Lee by the head. Not his hair. His entire head was within his grasp. Golem's hand could cover a twenty-inch screen. To Sammy Lee it must have felt like someone covered his head in a giant sack, and then started squeezing. The referee

started giving a foul countdown. It was because Golem and Sammy Lee were entangled, and also leaning on the rope. The rope break rule was in effect for Sammy Lee.

Golem tossed Sammy Lee away in frustration. Armored by his thick muscles, Sammy Lee flew to the center of the mat.

Soaring shoulder first, he landed with thud.

“Kyaa!” Yuri shrieked, covering her mouth with both hands. Here and there at tables cards were being dropped into slits feverishly.

I sat up straight to check on Landis. He was calmly watching the fight. Looking closely, he hadn’t made any bets. That’s a real regular for you. He understood the ebb and flow of a bout.

I returned my attention to the ring.

In the few moments I had turned away, Sammy Lee had gotten back on the offensive. He looked uninjured and ready to fight. His speed and technique made up for his weight and power disadvantage. He also recovered more quickly.

Sammy Lee nimbly slipped between Golem’s storm of punches, and returned with a barrage of kicks to Golem’s tree-trunk-like legs. Golem was doing what he could to grab Sammy Lee, but with all the grace of a backhoe, he couldn’t get his arms moving fast enough to keep up with him.

After a dozen or more kicks to Golem’s legs, Sammy Lee finally gouged a nerve.

The monster let out a horrendously painful shout as his giant knee broke. The inside of his leg began to swell and the skin started turning black.

Golem’s head was now down at the same level as Sammy Lee’s. Perfect positioning. Sammy Lee bent his flexible body down.

An awesome flurry of punts began. Kick, kick, kick, kick. The back of the head, temple, face, Sammy Lee showed no mercy as he kicked again and again. Sammy Lee was a true fighter. With repeated kicks and punches he would wear down his opponent’s stamina, then finish him off with a lock or strangle hold.

But since this was a big money fight, any ambiguous finish would not be accepted. Everyone knows that the fans want to see a knockout. Now I could see why this much smaller wrestler was chosen to be the challenger in this fight. The high level of these fighters was being wasted in such a rundown nightclub.

Golem's body began to shake, he fell down onto both knees, and put up no defense. He was still being pummelled by Sammy Lee's feet. His eyes looked hollow.

Suddenly, a light next to the slit turned red. No more bets. The slit would not accept any more cards. Even the bookmaker had decided there would be no more turns in this fight...

But, Golem had tricked Sammy Lee. The customers and bookmaker had been fooled, too. He wasn't as hurt as he let on.

It was when the sting of Sammy Lee's kicks began to dull. After laying dozens of kicks onto Golem's head, Sammy Lee must have been feeling some fatigue. His tempo was getting off, and his power was weakened. For just a moment, Sammy Lee wasn't fully concentrated on Golem. In that moment Golem reached out his big hand and grabbed Sammy Lee by the shoulder. Using Sammy Lee's dropped head, he pushed off Sammy Lee's body to stand upright. Now it was Golem laying a tirade of punches to Sammy Lee's head. It sounded like a hammer breaking through a concrete wall, and Sammy Lee's body was tossed into the air.

7

Sammy Lee's body fell to the mat. He was laid out like a fallen rag doll.

Broken, like a worn-out piece of machinery.

Fresh blood had been shed.

The white mat was brilliantly painted with crimson red flower petals.

Sammy Lee's forehead. Golem had split Sammy Lee's forehead with a

headbutt.

The “No more bets” light went out. The tide in this fight had changed, again.

Cheers and laughs of victory flew out from the crowd. In the center of the ring stood the heaving Golem. Looking at him, he could easily pass for a giant from a myth or fairy tale.

Sammy Lee escaped. He rolled off the mat, under the apron, and out of the ring.

Golem raised an angry roar. He raised his arms and chased after Sammy Lee heading toward the rope he had just slipped under.

As if in answer to Golem’s cry, from among the ringside tables several burly men began bustling and getting up. They were all wearing some sort of black uniform.

They rushed over to the groaning Sammy Lee, who was had ducked under the corner post. They were all trying to pull Sammy Lee out and get him back into the ring.

“It’s a Lumberjack Death Match. Instead of starting a count if a wrestler leaves the ring, the club bouncers toss him back in,” Jeff told us.

The Lumberjack Death Match—the name had been around for a long time. In the old days they would get a few dozen lumberjacks to form a ring, and the two combatants would be closed into the center. Until the fight was finished, neither were able to leave. Escape was never allowed... a real harsh rule.

Sammy Lee wasn’t actually trying to get away. That’s a fact, but he did refuse to immediately reenter the ring. He wanted a rest, taking into consideration the way he had been injured and was bleeding.

There was a jostling back and forth with the bouncers who were trying to toss him back in.

In the end, Sammy Lee was able to wrestle a little time from the ornery bouncers.

Golem was furious. He was this close to victory, and to let the challenger take a rest would only bring things back to the starting bell.

Golem voiced his frustration in a pointed growl and dove under the ropes and down off the ring onto the floor.

If Sammy Lee wasn't coming up, then Golem would go to him. Even if he KO'ed him out of the ring and then tossed Sammy Lee back in, that would signify the end of the bout. There was nothing in the rules against it—and it looked like Golem knew that clearly.

He swooped down on Sammy Lee. The bouncers and ref tried to hold him up, but he plowed through them like an out-of-control bulldozer. There was no stopping him. In fact, being tossed away brought even more injuries to the bouncers.

Having cleared away the referee and bouncers, Golem caught up with Sammy Lee.

Sammy Lee had no choice but to take on The Golem. There was no way to escape. Turning, he stood, looking straight at Golem's approach.

The battle began again. Sammy Lee was not able to counter Golem's rush. He was pushed backwards with no way to stop the giant.

They slid and crashed into a ringside table. The table was thrown up off of the floor and the chairs around it were smashed. There the two now-horizontal wrestlers began throwing fists at each other as hard as they could. The fans circled the wrestlers, and heated shouts and angry remarks were flying left and right.

"Uh oh!"

Yuri stood from her seat.

"That was Landis' table!"

I looked to confirm. She was right. The two wrestlers were now grappling where the person we thought was Landis had been sitting moments before. The last thing we needed right now was for Landis to go injured or missing. Now it appeared that it would be best for us to give him the protection he needed.

Yuri and I kicked off of our chairs and set out onto the floor. We slipped between the other tables and tried to make our way to the front.

But on the way there we were stopped.

“Where do you think you are going?”

There were two bouncers in black uniforms standing face to face in front of Yuri and me.

“Ringside,” I responded. “Out of our way!”

“You can certainly understand that in the interest of fairness, we cannot allow you to get any closer to the wrestlers at this time. Please accept our apologies. Now, if you could please return to your seats...,” answered the bouncer. His words were polite, but his tone grated on my ears.

“Fairness has nothing to do with it! My friend just got crushed in that brawl! Are you telling me I can’t go make sure he’s all right?!”

“These are the rules. Now, please, return to your seat. We ensure the safety of all our clientele.”

“Kei!” Yuri yelled out. “The ringside is a disaster area!”

I peered over the shoulder of the bouncers who were blocking my view.

Hoo boy, this was a mess. Without distinguishing between customers and bouncers, Golem was tossing bodies every which way.

It was pure pandemonium in front of the ring. People, tables, it was all the same to Golem.

“Get back!” said the bouncer standing in front of us.

“If you don’t get out of the way, you are going to be eating a knuckle sandwich!”

“Say, say, we got a feisty one,” the bouncer laughed sarcastically.

“So tell me, how is that knuckle sandwich served?”

“Like this!”

I unholstered my heatgun. At the same time, I checked to see where his feet were, and fired one shot.

An orange heat ray blasted the floor.

The burn just reached the tip of the bouncer's shoe.

“!”

The bouncer seemed to have lost his voice. His hair stood straight on end and he must have jumped two meters straight into the air.

“Goddamn you!”

The other bouncer's mood suddenly changed, and he came my way.

This one was Yuri's responsibility. Sprouting from her silver hot pants, one of Yuri's long legs swung forward for a horizontal kick.

Her leg met directly with the bouncer's face.

The seven-centimeter heel of her knee-high boot smashed into the bouncer's chin.

With a painful shout, the bouncer fell back. He spun into a table. The table top broke in two, sending all the glasses and plates smashing to the floor in a loud and spectacular crash.

The bouncer with the burned shoe was hopping around on one foot in circles.

The obstacles had been removed. Yuri and I looked toward the ring and restarted our search for Landis.

8

What we discovered was a scene like walking into Hell.

Being so close to the wrestlers brought no excitement whatsoever to the fans. The ringside was a mishmash of wrestlers, customers, and bouncers. Fans were punching bouncers as the bouncers were trying to get to the wrestlers. The wrestlers didn't care who was who. Whoever was in arm's reach got tossed aside. One would expect Sammy Lee to be choosing his opponents, but with the blood gushing from his forehead he couldn't see very well and as a result he was bashing heads indiscriminately. Golem was doing anything he could to get to him, and was randomly smashing and throwing like an angry hurricane.

People, furniture, dishes, it was all just junk in the way to him. It all went flying randomly though the air.

For a time, we were going to try and settle the riot down. After that we would be able to look for Landis. It would be great if he was still alive, but under the circumstances, it was hard to be optimistic.

I set the sights of my heatgun on the ring. You got it. The remedy was shock treatment. It goes without saying that shock can be very effective.

I aimed for the center of the mat, set the power gauge to full, and pulled the trigger.

The next moment.

The mat exploded into flames. The sudden blast rattled my eardrums. The bright flames roared, touching the ceiling, and spread in a circle.

Even I was taken by surprise by how huge the blast was.



In under a second the entire ring was ashes.

A moment later Yuri tossed an extinguisher capsule to the center of the fire while at the same time knocking out the heat sensor on the ceiling with her ray gun. The extinguisher spray in those ceiling sprayers is terrible for your skin, you know.

After the fire was out and the smoke cleared, all that was left of the ring were four blackened steel corner posts. The entire nightclub had fallen silent.

The room got so quiet, I almost thought something was wrong with my ears.

The wrestlers, customers, and bouncers all stood frozen, staring at us dumbfounded.

We were so gorgeous, they just couldn't pull their eyes off of us—I could say, but only as obvious comic relief.

At first, one bouncer came over to us.

“What in the hell are trying to do?!” he yelled loudly, coming closer.

I responded with the heatgun. With a painful moan, the bouncer vanished.

“Who do you think you are screwing with?!” rattled a deep voice from my periphery. If dinosaurs could speak, this is what their voices would probably sound like. It was a craggy voice, like he was speaking while gargling rocks.

Shoving away the broken tables and chairs, the source of the dinosaur voice—The Golem, came right toward me.

“You are the one screwing around,” I replied to Golem. “Professional wrestlers keep it in the ring!”

“What the—!”

Golem's face was livid. His features became strained, and his expression was one of hatred.

I lowered the heatgun and took my finger off the trigger. Even if I were to set his foot ablaze, he wasn't going to run away crying. And on the other side, killing him in cold blood wouldn't be good, either. There was only one person that could take Golem on... or I should say, one living thing...

“Knock it off!”

Someone landed between Golem and me.

Hold on! Hold on! I grasped my head. Not you! Jeff’s not who I was thinking of.

Konk.

There was a heavy thud.

Golem’s arm slowly returned to his side.

Jeff spun around. His ten-gallon hat went flying into the air, and his body fell to the floor.

“Jeff!”

I threw myself to the fallen Jeff. Aslaville’s sheriff’s eyes rolled back into his head. He was barely conscious. This was awful. Destroying something so handsome.

“You really shouldn’t have done that!”

I glared at Golem.

“So? What can you do about it?”

Golem stuck out his chest. Up close, he really was enormous. He was only slightly smaller than an elephant.

A black shadow danced through the air.

It swooped down and landed, standing just diagonally from me, never making a sound.

The monster wrestler winced, and took a step back.

The shaking feelers. The sharp, pointy fangs. The long claws which can tear KZ alloy into ribbons. The jet-black body, wrapped in a deep, glossy fur, and those eyes, burning with fire, only hinting at the storm that raged behind them. A kind of phantom, but not one you hear of in legendary stories of evil spirits. A lot more is required to defeat this phantom in battle.

The Black Destroyer Mugi.

Mugi got down low and proceeded forward. He moved right in front of Golem. He was only three meters away. With a dark sparkle in his eye, his entire body gushed with animosity. He was the living incarnation of bloodlust. To Golem it might have felt like he had a drawn sword at his throat. His face had gone flush, and he didn't move a muscle.

"Where's Landis? Is he alive?" Yuri asked coldly, coming over to me after walking through and checking the faces of the frozen-in-shock customers. She still held the ray gun in her right hand. She hadn't holstered it.

"Are, are you talking about me?"

Immediately to my left was a tall mountain of busted tables and chairs. The response came from inside that mound.

The mountain bulged out, and then tore through.

His shirt was torn in several places, and his face had some bumps and bruises, but there was no doubt that it was Landis who climbed out of the hole. It appeared he'd taken some punches, and escaped inside the pile of broken furnishings. It seemed only regular customers were accustomed to such scenes of carnage.

"Are you Landis?" I asked.

"Mine #11's Landis," he answered in a whisper with a befuddled look. From the open floor a flood of voices began to rise. With the initial fear passing, the customers were talking amongst themselves trying to assess the scene.

I raised my voice a little.

"We are Kei and Yuri from the WWWA," I enunciated clearly. "We came here because we have some questions we would like to ask you."

For a moment, the din of voices fell silent. It seemed like everyone present all swallowed their breath at the same time. Even The Golem's eyes got big and round.

"Dirty Pair...", someone said.

That was *our* cue.

Again the floor was engulfed in a high-pitched chatter from the crowd.

Then it happened.

“Everyone, quiet...”

The calm, yet practiced and dignified voice carried over throughout the club.

Suddenly the murmuring stopped.

I turned around.

It was coming from the two giant screens. At some point the screens that were used to see the bouts up close starting broadcasting something different.

I could see a man’s face. He looked to be just entering his fifties. He was pretty chubby, and it looked like he had three chins. His eyes were small and round, like a couple of brown berries. His hair was gray and thinning.

“I am the owner, Telestofarnus,” said the face on the screen. “The fine ladies of the WWWA will please excuse my sudden interruption. But after all, it seems like my wrestling hall has been put into quite a chaotic state. A quiet and calm conversation isn’t likely. What do you say to continuing our chat in my office. Here there are no grapplers or boorish bouncers.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “We’re bringing Landis with us.”

“Of course, the more the merrier,” said Telestofarnus, waving any doubt away with his right hand.

“Also, call an ambulance,” added Yuri. “The sheriff got beat up pretty bad.”

“Consider it done.”

The overweight owner nodded, raising his thick triangular eyebrows.

The screen went black.

“Excuse me,” the manager said, coming up to us. “This way, please. Allow me to show you to the owner’s room.”

He respectfully lowered his head.

Led by the tall and lanky manager, Yuri and I, along with Landis in tow, made our way to the rear of the clubhouse. Landis glanced around nervously. I wondered if he'd come to Salvatore straight from the mine after work. He was still wearing his dark green work uniform. He was of average height and build, but didn't really fit the miner image. He just looked like a typical middle-aged man.

"I wonder how the bout will turn out...," thought Landis out loud. After all that, this guy was most worried about his wrestling bet.

"Without a ring, there is no match. We have already begun sending everyone home," the manager responded.

"But will it be ready by next week?"

Hearing that matches couldn't continue sent Landis into a panic.

"Of course, we'll be up and ready by then."

"Really..."

Landis let out a sigh of relief. These were the symptoms of a serious gambling addiction.

We walked down a dim corridor for what seemed like forever, then went up in an oversized elevator before reaching what must have been the owner's office door. It looked like a very expensive door. It was wood with fancy solid gold patterns inlaid.

As the manager stood in front of the door, it opened on its own.

The manager gave a reverent bow.

"I have brought you your guests."

He stepped aside and gestured for us to come in.

I went in first, followed by Yuri, and then Landis.

Poor guy. He looked a little overwhelmed by the gaudiness and scale of this place. The manager did not follow us in.

"Well, I'll be..."

Entering we soon saw the owner had stood up from his chair to greet us with

arms outspread. He had a unique body type. He was almost as wide as he was tall. And I am not saying that he was short. I am saying that his waist, or his width, or his diameter was staggering. His triple-chin was a real sight to behold.

“More beautiful than the rumors I hear.”

Coming out from behind his desk, he put his hand out for a handshake. It took a few moments to return the handshake. The reason was that the room was so gigantic. Despite that, it held only his desk and chair. It reminded me of the chief’s office. Same amount of furniture, but this room was easily ten times as large.

After walking over to the desk, Yuri and I each shook Telestofarnus’ hand. For some reason he ignored Landis. Landis hung back behind us sheepishly, not getting near the owner. He stopped about halfway between the door and the desk, his shoulders slumped down.

“First of all, please take a seat and relax.”

A part of the floor rose up and became a sofa. A very fancy sofa, with a sideboard attached. In the sideboard were bottles of different kinds of alcohol. It was a portable bar.

Yuri and I plunked down on the sofa. For whatever reason, Landis kept his distance. To the Salvatore owner, the customer was his livelihood, and Landis should take advantage, but still, Landis remained reserved.

“Now, what can I pour for you?” asked Telestofarnus. Telestofarnus didn’t acknowledge Landis’ presence at all.

I ordered a sloe gin fizz and Yuri had a glass of rose wine. Telestofarnus poured himself a straight scotch. Landis got the cold shoulder.

We lightly clinked our glasses in a toast. The sofa Yuri and I sat on was plenty big for the two of us, but I bet it might not be big enough for Telestofarnus’ rear, even if he sat on it alone.

“All right, then...,” Telestofarnus said with a formal tone, and set his glass down. “I am hoping you can answer a couple of questions for me. What are WWWA Crime TCs doing on a remote mining planet? There haven’t been any major incidents here. But still, the Dirty Pair arrive and proceed to torch my

wrestling ring. I would just like to know why.”

“You are mistaken on one point,” I answered.

“What are you talking about?”

“That the WWWA only respond to major incidents. Just because this is a remote and peaceful town doesn’t mean that nothing happens.”

I talked to Telestofarnus about the Landis incident. I also didn’t hide the fact that it was the mayor who’d made the request. It didn’t really matter, but I didn’t forget to let him know how handsome and capable Jeff was.

“Invisible jaws, you say...”

Telestofarnus pondered the concept as he stroked his thick eyebrows.

“Hey, what’s-your-name! Landis! Did you really get hurt that bad?”

Telestofarnus suddenly turned toward the hunched over miner and asked rather directly.

“No, sir. It was nothing at all. It was just a little scratch, that’s all.” Little by little Landis’ head shook from side to side.

“Maybe so, but you have been shooting your mouth off about this little scratch to whoever will listen, huh?” Telestofarnus retorted sharply. His beady eyes narrowed and glared at the miner coldly. Landis’ face went pale.

“May I butt in?” I said, cutting into the two men’s conversation. I couldn’t let it go on like this.

“Mr. Telestofarnus, you are the nightclub’s owner, correct? And isn’t Mr. Landis a customer of yours? How can you talk to him in such a condescending manner? I find it more than a little hard to listen to. Why don’t you show some manners?”

“A customer? Landis...?”

The expression on Telestofarnus’ face changed. He looked bewildered.

“Did you two really come here without knowing a damn thing?” he asked wearily.

“Without knowing what?”

Now it was my turn to be bewildered.

“They call me the owner, but not because I am the owner of this nightclub,” Telestofarnus said dryly.

“Meaning...”

“Meaning I own all the ore on Chakra.”

Kyaa!

I screamed out inside my head. So... So then, when they say “owner” ... They mean the owner of all the mines!

10

“But Chakra is under the rule of Mandala, right?” Yuri asked in my place. Taken aback, I could move nothing but my mouth. But words wouldn’t come out. Yuri, I’m counting on you.

“—makes sense. But how did you come to be the owner of everything?”

“I was commissioned to do so by the government,” said Telestofarnus. “After making the investments and developing the holding company, I brought over mining engineers and equipment. In a nutshell, my company built Aslaville from scratch. And so, no, Landis is not my ‘customer.’ He is a peon of mine. You should know who you are talking to. If you think I am simply the owner of some rundown nightclub, you are sorely mistaken.”

What was I supposed to think? He was here, wasn’t he?

“As his employer, allow me to ask about the incident my employee has gotten himself involved in. It’s really a simple matter,” Telestofarnus continued.

Well, it seemed all right. But thinking about it, this wasn’t the ideal way of doing things. He managed the mines, paid his employees, then took it all back through alcohol sales and gambling. All the money ends up in one place.

“My deepest apologies, sir,” said Landis, out of the blue. “But I didn’t tell anyone about my injury. I had it treated at the mine’s medical office. I have no

idea how the mayor caught wind of it.”

“The how doesn’t concern me,” Telestofarnus spat out. “The problem is that now I have to deal with it.”

“That’s not Landis’ fault,” I said.

“Hmph,” Telestofarnus snorted. “I wonder.”

After a few moments he returned his gaze toward me.

“For a certain amount of money, I am thinking you might pack up and go home.”

“Who? Us? No way!” I said, immediately rejecting the very idea. “I am not sure what you are so worried about, but we don’t negotiate like this. We will leave when we solve the case. Did you really think we could be bribed?”

“I am not afraid of you solving the case and finding the truth— I am afraid of the damage incurred in getting there,” Telestofarnus said frankly. “We have just gotten Chakra on track. And then you two arrive. I would like to chalk up my losses at one wrestling ring and stop it there.”

Uggh. I was struck mute. What a powerfully persuasive speech. There was nothing I could say to retort.

“If you want us to return home, then cooperate with our investigation,” Yuri said. Nice. Great comeback.

“You can just give us some helpful hints. We don’t expect you to completely expose yourself to us. If we could get just a fragment of a clue, we could start to solve the case, and help you out at the same time. That’s why they call us trouble consultants, and not investigators. Anything you have is fine. Tell us whatever comes to mind. The sooner you help us, the sooner we are on our way back to Headquarters.”

“A hint, huh...”

Telestofarnus stroked his three chins and leaned his head back.

“This is a peaceful planet”

“Umm...”

Landis fearfully bit his lip.

“Would it be... May I say something?”

“Go right ahead,” said Telestofarnus arrogantly. “You are the one who got us here. Let’s hear your contribution to the conversation.”

“What about the leader—”

“Chk!” Telestofarnus clicked his tongue. “He’s nothing but a lunatic. He’s not the problem.”

“Leader?” I asked.

“A crazy man who appeared recently from the mountains,” explained Telestofarnus.

“He used to be one of my miners, but one day he started screaming that the hour of judgment was near and he starting getting into all this religious mumbo-jumbo. Now he’s the leader of the Absolute Children of Heaven and has a group of followers, but any person who would listen to that phony is a moron.”

“What do you make of him?” I asked, looking at Landis.

“It’s not so much what I think of him, but just that his sudden strange appearance recently, I thought it might be a hint for your investigation, so...”

Landis’ voice got progressively quieter, finally falling into complete silence.

“Even for a hint, that’s a lousy one,” stated Telestofarnus, drooping his shoulders.

We continued talking for about twenty minutes.

No other real progress was made, and the meeting ended ambiguously.

Telestofarnus wasn’t able to buy us off of Chakra, and we didn’t get any really useful information, or even hints, to help our investigation.

In the end, the meeting had been a mutual waste of time.

Leaving Telestofarnus at his office in Salvatore, we made our way back. Well, we didn’t exactly have a “back” to make our way to, yet we needed to decide to go to *Lovely Angel*, or find a hotel, or return to Jeff’s explosion-damaged office. I wondered how Jeff’s injuries were. I hoped he didn’t have any permanent scars

on his face.

My thoughts were fractured in a thousand pieces as the manager hustled us out of the club.

It was bright out, so at first I thought it was around noon, but there were no people walking the main street in front of Salvatore. It must have been the middle of the night. No cars drove by, either.

“Man, it’s bright out.”

I stretched my arms high above my head. Looking tired, Mugi rolled onto his side like he was about to fall asleep.

“Aah, maybe some nice man will come up in his fancy car and invite us to go someplace,” said Yuri, almost sounding as if she was talking in her sleep.

“What are you talking about?” I said, snorting a laugh out my nose.

An air car slid around the corner toward us. It was a large-class limousine. It wasn’t the kind of car you’d expect to see in Aslaville.

It stopped in front of us. The heavy door opened. Expecting someone to get out, we got out of the way, but our assumption wasn’t correct. The passenger window opened. A middle-aged gentleman examined our faces.

“Are you not the two ladies of *Lovely Angel*?” he said, using our codename correctly. Intelligent. I didn’t know who this man was, but I could already tell he was a refined gentleman.

“Yes, that is correct. And you are...?” I asked, giving my cutest grin. Oh, the details weren’t exactly the same, but didn’t Yuri just say something about this very event?

“I have come to give you a ride,” said the gentleman politely. “I was sent here by request of the mayor.”

That made sense. We nodded in agreement. First the owner, and now the mayor.

hold on, something doesn't quite add up!

"I am Aslaville's mayor, Bonassis. I am actually the governor of Chakra as dispatched from Mandala, but as you surely know, the only city here is Aslaville. Furthermore, the owner runs the mines. That's why everyone around here calls me 'Mayor.'"

The mayor puffed on a cigar and let out a high-pitched laugh. Hee hee hee. His chuckle was drowned out by the sounds of waves. The noise from the ship's engine was so quiet, I couldn't hear it at all. We had been traveling quite a ways, but I could hardly tell that we were moving through the water. It was an incredibly comfortable ride.

After climbing aboard the limousine parked in front of Salvatore, we'd zipped through the center of Aslaville, and continued onto the highway. Why does the one town planet of Chakra need a highway like this? I couldn't help but wonder. We were moving in the opposite direction of the space port. He wouldn't take us to a mine, would he? That didn't make sense. To get to a mine you needed to use mountain roads, which wouldn't be good for a limousine's exterior, if it could even make it up the roads at all. I wanted to ask questions to the gentlemen in the front passenger seat, but the front and rear of the limo were separated by a smoke-tinted glass screen, so there was no way to communicate. Was this really just a fancy-looking paddy wagon? Sure, there were all kinds of liquor and you could play whatever sort of background music you wanted. However, sitting next to Yuri and Mugi and with free fancy liquor, I was still sad. Sheesh... I really wanted to be with Jeff!

We rode in the limousine for just over an hour. I would estimate we covered 350 kilometers, a pretty far distance from where we'd started.

The limo stopped. The man in the passenger seat got out. The door opened up. The smell of fresh water was carried in the breeze that wafted into the car.

“Waa!”

Yuri’s eyes opened wide.

It was a yacht harbor. Right in front of us was a very fancy-looking wharf. Many large-scale cruisers were docked for as far as the eye could see.

“This isn’t the ocean, right?”

I sniffed the air.

“O’Tana Lake. Indeed, it is as big as an ocean, but is, in fact, a splendid fresh water lake,” said the man. He said he was the mayor’s secretary, but he seemed more qualified as a tour guide. The way he spoke was beautiful.

“What are we doing here? Are we going yachting?” Yuri asked. Apparently the highway was built for the sole purpose of getting to and from this lake. What an extravagance.

“Yes, you are correct,” said the secretary, bowing to Yuri. “Please, shall we board the ship docked over there?”

He pointed to a ship floating in the center of the harbor.

It was an especially gigantic cruiser. Its hull was a shiny, pure white, and looked absolutely elegant. All of the other ships were quiet, only this one had dozens of crew members getting on and off in preparation.

“Will we meet the mayor there?” I asked the secretary.

“I would expect that he is anticipating your arrival.”

“Laying it on a little thick, don’t you think?” said Yuri. She wasn’t thinking about what the mayor had planned.

“Some recent events have taken place,” said the secretary, ignoring Yuri’s comment, “and the mayor would like to discuss these matters with you directly.”

The mayor’s secretary walked us to the ship, and ascended the short gangway. The name of the ship was written on its side. *El Santo*—it meant

“saint.”

Once we made it to the deck, the ship’s captain came to us. He was tall with a slim build. A little younger, and he was almost the spitting image of Jeff. Almost. He was well into his middle-aged years. The captain took over the tour guide duties from the secretary.

We were led to a compact cabin. Not only was the hull painted white, but so was the interior of the cabins. The furniture and walls were pure white, not a stain or blemish to be seen. There were two beds folded into the left and right walls. Mugi pulled one out of the wall and went to lie down on it.

“Once the meal is ready, we will call you,” said the captain. “Until then, feel free to relax here.”

With a salute, he turned and left the room.

Soon afterward the cruiser began to move.

With a perfect, trouble-free departure, the harbor got smaller and smaller as we moved farther away.

“I thought the owner was a little screwy, but the mayor might be even worse,” said Yuri. “You’d probably go loopy if you had to go out with him.”

I scooted Mugi closer to the wall and lay down on the bed. I used Mugi’s back as a pillow.

“I’m getting hungry,” I said to myself out loud.

After that we waited in our cabin for two hours.

At exactly the two-hour mark, a purser came to get us. Being on the verge of starvation, I needed a hand standing up. Yuri asked if it was all right for Mugi to join us, and he said that it was. They seemed to understand how we operate on this ship. I could see the news made my part-time pillow happy.

We were led to the dining hall which was one deck above the main deck. It was a large room with huge plate glass windows. There was one large oval-shaped table. Around the curve there were three place-settings arranged. They must have been for Yuri, the mayor, and me. The settings were spread fairly far apart. The mayor hadn’t arrived yet. The purser pulled out the chairs. Yuri and I

sat down together. In a gesture of cool elegance, the purser quietly pushed our chairs in. Mugi was on my right. Naturally, he didn't need a chair. Mugi sat down on the floor.

"Oh, oh, thank you for taking the trouble."

Just as we were seated we heard a voice. Turning our heads we saw a blond man standing in the doorway smoking a cigar.

He looked to be in his late forties or maybe early fifties. No, he wasn't that old. He wore a bright, shiny suit. He was of average height. But since he was rail thin, he looked taller than he was. His build was, in a word, skinny. But you couldn't say he looked sickly. His complexion was good and he looked cheery. His gray-colored eyes sparkled brightly. He had a thick head of hair and he had almost no wrinkles.

"The Trouble Consultants dispatched from the WWWA, I presume." Puffing his cigar, the blond man slowly made his way to where we were sitting. His gestures and aura were vaguely feminine. He spoke in a high-pitched voice.

"I am Aslaville's mayor, Bonassis."

2

The purser helped the mayor get seated, then disappeared. In his place five waiters carried in large dishes. The mayor tossed his cigar into a pot intended for that purpose at the end of the table. This was an official full-course meal. The menu was full of popular Mandala favorites, explained the mayor. Considering that I didn't recognize most of the dishes, this made sense. The wine and all the ingredients were shipped especially from Mandala. Even the hors d'oeuvres were rich and extravagant. On the other hand, the wine was very light, and was in perfect harmony with the food. Even though the mayor was as skinny as a mummy, he was a top gourmet with a healthy appetite. I wonder what he did with all those calories. That's the one secret I really wanted to find out!

During dinner we made small talk. Yuri asked the waiter, and he soon came back with a silver platter. On it was one kalium capsule, and he set it on the floor in front of the outstretched Mugi. Mugi respectfully swallowed the capsule in one gulp. That was Mugi's food for the day. Kalium capsules may be expensive, but their simplicity is hard to top.

Before long it was time for dessert, and then after-dinner tea. The tea also came from Mandala. It had a rich aroma and was just a little sweet. The waiters cleared the plates and set candlesticks decorated with fresh flowers on the table. The curtains were closed, and the candles were lit. All five waiters gave a deep bow and disappeared back into the kitchen.

It was just us and the mayor remaining in the dining room.

"Well then..." started the mayor, taking in the aroma of his tea in an overly fancy gesture, his eyes closed as if in a trance. I bet when he carries his cap, his pinky sticks out.

"Shall we think about getting down to business?"

To check the flavor, he took one small sip of tea.

"There are many things we'd like to ask you about," I said.

"As do I to you," the mayor said, glancing up and meeting my eyes. "Why is it that you didn't come to me, the requestor, once you arrived?"

Ooh, that was a rather pointed question.

"Well, here's what we did," I answered nonchalantly. "After arriving and getting a car, we made our way into town. We then met the handsome sheriff. After that we were wrapped up in a murder case involving the same invisible fangs. We went to find Landis, and the owner showed up."

"See! We just hadn't had time to get to you!"

"Sounds suspicious to me..."

Yuri raised an eyebrow to this comment. The nerve. We don't owe him anything more than a rough outline of our day, if that, even.

"I have already been made aware of what you have done and what you have seen since arriving," said the mayor, a little laugh slipping out from the corner

of his mouth. “I didn’t contact the WWWA and request their help as a whim or a joke. As a Mandala government official placed in charge of Chakra, I took this case very seriously, and therefore made my request. Please don’t forget it.”

“It’s not as if we were avoiding you, you know,” said Yuri. “We have a way we go about conducting our own investigations. There was nothing we needed to hear from the requestor before starting. We did what we could to talk with the victim and closest witness, Landis...”

“And what were the results?”

“At this point there are none.”

I shrugged my shoulders and raised my open palms face up. The mayor’s left eyebrow began to shake up and down.

“Let’s take some time to have a thorough talk today. Having WWWA Crime TCs come all the way to Chakra to just wreak havoc on Aslaville will not reflect well on me.”

Did he really go there?! I felt a hot pain tear through my chest. How sarcastic! How rude!

“May I ask a question?” inclined Yuri, lowering her head as she looked into the mayor’s eyes. Her lips formed a loving smile. She is the master at this reverse move. I tend to wear my heart on my sleeve, and could never fake not being mad like she can.

“How did you find out about Landis’ incident?”

Yuri brought her hands together, interlocking her thin, pale fingers.

“Even his employer, the owner, didn’t know about it.”

“Oh, that?” asked the mayor, pulling a cigar from his pocket. With our permission, he lit the cigar.

“My position isn’t decorative, and my work isn’t for show. Officially I am the governor of Chakra. But the person in economic control is, without a doubt, the owner. However, the head of administration is me, no matter how you cut it. Even recognizing the level of self-governance the citizens hold, I am the one who holds the true power.”

“So you receive and send information,” I said.

“That’s one small part of what I do,” said the mayor calmly, in an attempt to downplay the issue.

“So you are saying you employ a separate public safety system, outside of the sheriff, correct?” asked Yuri, piling on to the question.

“It’s nothing as grandiose as that.”

The mayor’s eyebrow began to shake again. This appeared to be a habit of his.

“They are less than ten full-time staff. They are prohibited from conducting criminal investigations. It’s a modest operation, believe me.”

“So you receive your intel from them, and now you are checking it. That’s how the Landis case got on your radar.”

“I have a responsibility to do it.”

“What are you saying?”

“The owner.”

The mayor’s voice got tiny, and he leaned in as he said it.

“Owner?”

“He is with Lucifer.”

Wha—!

I stopped breathing. Without thinking, I leapt up onto my chair, shaking to keep my balance. The tea Yuri was drinking got stuck in her throat, and she started coughing violently.

That... that is insanity. To think that someone entrusted with the development of an entire planet could be a member of Lucifer. It’s crazy!

Lucifer is a gigantic organized crime organization with influences in every corner of the galaxy. They are extremely loyal, and work under a strict order of rules. They are known for being inhumane, audacious, and very crafty. In a word, they are evil. After space pirates, they are humanity’s greatest enemy, as designated by United Galactica. In our work, we have had some cases where

the crimes committed were somehow connected to Lucifer—more accurately, a lot of cases.

“Do... do you have positive proof of this?” I gasped finally catching my breath and getting my voice back.

“No,” he said, waving his hand. “If we did, don’t you think we would have arrested him by now? We got our hands on the information, but not on any proof, so there is little I can do about it. And then as we are working on it, this bizarre incident takes place. I thought we had a real chance then. By having a criminal investigation occur on Chakra, I figured we could get the owner to show his true colors. With that in mind, I contacted the WWWA.”

“Hmm,” I said, nodding.

Hmm. What the hell was he talking about?

3

This was the last thing I had expected to hear. If what he was saying was actually true, this could be a big problem. If Chakra’s chemical and ore mining industries were really mixed into this, then Mandala could be put into a state of emergency. Buddijium was the biggest worry. If this rare element were to fall under the control of Lucifer the blow to each planet-state’s science industry would be massive.

“I was finally able to meet with you, but in such a roundabout way, you must be completely exhausted,” the mayor said, breaking the silence. “But in order to ensure your safety, this was the only way. You two have met the owner face-to-face. He heard that I know about the incident that he tried to cover up, and that I contacted the WWWA about it. This is serious. Be constantly aware of your surroundings, and show no weaknesses.”

“Is that why you brought us out in your ship?”

“Yes,” said the mayor, looking straight at me. “This is a normal cruiser, equipped with no weapons whatsoever, but she does have defense systems.

We are using a geosynchronous laser defense satellite aligned with the center of this vessel. We also have a system to check for submarines or other underwater attacks. Naturally, we are prepared to deal with any attack immediately.”

“It’s as if you are at war...” said Yuri.

“Knowing that the enemy is Lucifer, do you still think we are over-prepared?”

“Exactly,” I said as I nodded my head. He was exactly right. Even if there was only an outside chance that the owner was a part of Lucifer, if he knew that he was under suspicion, then there was no such thing as being over-prepared. If anything, more should be done.

Requesting the United Space Force to be dispatched to Chakra wouldn’t be a bad idea.

“I trust you now understand the situation,” the mayor continued.

“You should have met with me as soon as you landed.”

That last comment didn’t help the situation. In my head I was protesting. We had that trouble at Lyonesse, and he didn’t exactly send anyone to pick us up, and Jeff is too handsome, and what the hell? These were all legitimate reasons why we didn’t.

Kaboom.

From somewhere there was a loud noise. It was a dense sound, like an explosion, but it seemed I had grown too used to such sounds, and hardly noticed.

And then.

Kaboom.

This time the sound was louder, and it shook my legs through the floor.

“What’s that?!”

The mayor stood, his face turning white.

The ship rose up suddenly.

We were being carried up by a swell in the water, but that’s not how it felt to

me. It felt like the cruiser suddenly jumped twenty meters into the air. Sometimes I hated the laws of physics.

First we were slammed to the floor, and then thrown to the ceiling. And it wasn't just us. The dining table was flying in the air, too. Of course, the chairs couldn't be left out. We had escaped death. I had banged my head, my back was in pain, and I was about to lose consciousness, but was still alive. It didn't hurt like I had been beaten, it hurt like I had been torn to pieces. Miraculously, the mayor, Yuri, and I hadn't been struck by the table or chairs. Mugi was also relatively fine. The table had broken in two, and the chairs were in busted into pieces. A broken piece had cut the mayor's face. However, he didn't seem affected. He remained cool, even at the sight of his own blood.

The ship kept rising and falling. The intensity of the wave subsided, but at some point we also started being pushed laterally, and it was almost impossible to stay on two feet. Moved by momentum, the heavy table top kept sliding into me, so I had to contend with that, too.

"Mayor!"

One of the walls had turned into a screen. It was one of the inner walls near the corner. The ship's captain appeared on the screen. His face was pale and there was blood on his forehead. He must have been tossed around, too. He wasn't wearing his hat.

"What was that? What happened?" the mayor asked hurriedly. He was visibly shaken, but his voice remained strong. He was unaffected by his injuries.

"Submarine...," said the captain. "It exploded. Not clear yet why."

"That's what got us?"

The mayor's eyes looked up.

"Yes, sir. Aa—!"

We could see on the screen the captain turning around.

"What do you—? Hey! Waa!"

His voice turned into a scream.

"Aaa—!"

He was trying to escape.

“Captain!” yelled the mayor. He got away, so there was no one on the screen. All we could see was the bare wall of the bridge.

Startled shrieks came through the screen’s speakers.

At the same time.

The screen went completely white. It looked as if the screen was broadcasting a bright sandstorm.

“What, what’s happening...?”

His face flushed, he turned back to us. His eyes weren’t focused on anything.

However.

This was not a time to be in a state of shock.

Another jolt knocked the ship.

It wasn’t as big as the last one. But it was sharper. The first time it was like a push, but this one was like a punch. What was happening, indeed?!

The half-conscious mayor shot into the air. Yuri and I tried to wedge ourselves into the corner using our hands and feet, but it was no use. We were thrown diagonally, hard into a wall. Sparks flew and I had the wind knocked out of me. My body was immobile, and I began to lose consciousness from the pain.

I fell to the floor. Right onto the back of my head. My spine made an unpleasant sound upon hitting the ground. I had tried to use my arms to break my fall, and an acute pain ran through them upon landing.

I rolled over once and lay flat on my stomach. I heard a rubbing sound.

In a haze, I opened my eyes. My eyes were almost touching the floor. I tried to lift my head, but I couldn’t move.

“!”

I could see the source of the sound. It was the table. The ship was at an angle. The legless table top was sliding toward me. If it were to hit me, it would smash my head into pieces.

I want to escape! But I can't escape. My body isn't responding. So this was paralysis. I couldn't move.

The table continued closer. The table top filled my field of vision. Dammit. I'm toast!

4

Whack!

The table top flew into the air. It smashed into the wall closest to me, breaking into many small pieces. My eyes were wide open, so I witnessed the whole thing. But I didn't at all understand what had happened. All I knew for sure was that my head was still properly attached to my body.

"Mgyaa," Mugi cried from somewhere. He was close. I got it, it was you. It took a minute for my brain to process in this condition. Mugi had saved me. Wow! Nice work! Incredible!

Trying to get a look at Mugi and thinking about the inevitable death I just escaped, I focused all my energy on lifting my head. The pain was massive, and it felt like my neck was about to snap. Using pure will power, I did all I could to ignore the pain.

I was able to get my head up. But no one was there. All I could see was the screen broadcasting the whiteout. Where did everyone go? Don't make me turn my head any more.

The next moment.

I saw the unimaginable.

The dining room tore in half. It all happened in under a second. The back of the dining room. Where the screen was. Suddenly, it was gone. The sound of boards being snapped, the sound of plastic being crushed, the sound of metal being torn. These noises were all mixed together and filled my ears. And then the far end of the room was just gone.

A bright light filled the room, and I could see the blue sky outside. The bright sun hung in the sky. I squinted my eyes. Where there once was a wall, was now a bare opening, and I could see the view outside perfectly.

Damn. What could I compare it to? Got it. A crocodile. It looked like a crocodile had bitten off one side of a wood crate. The dining room being the wood crate. And the croc's jaws were see-through. As in they were invisible. The point of separation was torn roughly. The room and everything in it was still at an angle.

I felt another shock come. It felt like it was coming from below, and I put my head down.

Hyaa!

I screamed. It was breaking. The ship. It was being destroyed.

It was biting down. The invisible jaws onto the dining room. No, the whole ship, from the side. The supports began to grate and creak loudly. The entire room began to vibrate. The strain was getting worse. The floor was now at such an angle that I slid down to the corner between the wall and floor.

My hand felt something. I couldn't turn my head, so I wasn't able to see what it was. I grabbed onto it. It was soft. It was Yuri's hand. I was sure of it. Yuri, it's me! It's Kei!

My body felt hot. I saw a bright light inside my head. This, this sensation was... But why now?!

The bright light exploded. White. Everything white. Aah, this was ecstasy. I was carried away. Spreading out. My body was floating. What's that? What's that I see above the light?

Another explosion. Dim. Darkness came. I became numb. My consciousness. Being sucked away. Spinning. Falling.

Then.

I didn't know anything.

"..."

I figured it out first.

I awoke to a sharp pain.

Someone was stroking my face. Was their hand wet? No, it was too soft to be a hand. Stop it. It tickles. I'm awake. Stop!

My eyes opened.

But it was completely dark. No, that's not right. It wasn't dark. It was black.

"Mgyaa!"

The black mass in front of my eyes spoke. When it opened its mouth I could see its red tongue and white fangs. That's Mugi! That was Mugi's red tongue that was stroking my face. He was licking me. Hey! No wonder it tickled.

I put out my hand and grabbed one of the feelers that sprouted from Mugi's shoulders to pull myself up.

Doing so, everything went dark. I thought I had vertigo, so I stopped moving, but that wasn't it. I tried to find one point with my eyes, but my entire body started shaking. It wasn't that I was dizzy, but that I had fallen asleep in an unstable and unsteady location.

But where the hell was I?

I turned over to see where I was.

Hoo boy.

I was amazed.

I can't express my bewilderment in words.

It was a giant plank.

And that was all. It was a piece of scrap about five meters long. It wasn't a perfect square, but, well, pretty close. It must have been a piece of the *El Santo* ceiling or deck. The plank was made of plastic. It was thick, and seemed sturdy.



I had been asleep on the plastic plank. It wasn't only me. Both Yuri and the mayor were there, too. And, Mugi, of course. There was no doubt Mugi'd gathered us together and carried us onto the plank. We gotta get away from this disaster. That's probably what Mugi was thinking when he rescued us.

The plank was floating somewhere in the middle of the lake. I don't know that it was actually the middle, but looking around, I couldn't see the shore in any direction. So it might as well have been smack in the middle. Even if we'd had a way to paddle, I wouldn't have had the foggiest idea which way to go.

"Un, uun."

I heard a groan. It was Yuri.

As I was thinking, Mugi had proceeded to lick Yuri's face. That brought Yuri back to consciousness.

"Wake up, sleepyhead! Chop chop!"

I helped Mugi wake her up. I slapped her lightly on the cheeks. "That hurts!"

Yuri opened her eyes and awoke angry.

"We're drifting in the water."

I calmly told her what was going on, allowing her to take it in as she woke up fully.

"What?!"

Shocked, she jumped up.

There was water all around us. As far as the eye could see. There was no sign of land anywhere.

"Where's the ship?" she asked, looking at me distressed. Yuri was a little slow at grasping the situation.

"I am not sure if it sank or if it broke into pieces, but I am sure we are on top of the last of the remains."

I pointed down. Her eyes followed my finger.

"Isn't this a piece of the ship?"

“Like I told you, we’re floating adrift on the water.”

“Do we have a motor”

“What do you think?!”

“Aah! What’s going on?!”

Again, a shout of surprise rose through the air. This time it was the mayor’s voice. Mugi hadn’t licked his face, so it seemed he’d woken up on his own. That’s a fine man. We explained to the mayor how it seemed some invisible jaws had torn open the ship and how Mugi must have rescued us and that now we were stuck on a plastic plank floating in the middle of the lake.

“Are you sure about the invisible fangs?” the mayor asked, leaning forward.

“If you asked me for proof, I couldn’t help you, but that’s how it looked to me,” I replied. “And look here.”

I pointed to the edge of the plastic plank.

“Wouldn’t you say that looks like some kind of bite mark?”

“What could this...” said the mayor, stretching his neck.

“Yuri, this reminds me of the wound in the old man’s neck. Just at a bigger scale—

“Here!” Yuri snapped her fingers. “It’s about ten times the scale, but there’s no mistaking. This is exactly the same mark as the invisible fangs.”

“Are you saying this one was full-grown?”

The mayor was still stretching his neck out.

“The bite marks on Landis also looked like the bite marks on the old man. The scale was about twice as big in that case, but they looked exactly the same. You could easily tell. I’d never seen anything like it in the entire galaxy.”

“If the mayor is targeting the owner, maybe then the owner has a hand in these attacks,” said Yuri.

“That would be unthinkable,” said the mayor, shaking his head. “If that were true, I would have heard about it through my intelligence network. In regards to the owner, I can safely say that my information network is flawless.”

“Then who is behind these fangs...”

“Mgyaa” Mugi called out. Wondering what he was doing, I turned only to see him looking up into the sky, his feelers wriggling. No, it wasn’t only his feelers. The fine hair where his ears should be were vibrating. This Mugi was up to something.

Then it became obvious.

“Look!” screamed Yuri, pointing at the sky.

The sun was behind us. Mugi was also staring the same way.

“Something’s flying this way. It looks like an airship!”

“Really?!”

The mayor tried to stand up. The plank started rocking from his movements. Numbskull! Take a look around! Be more careful!

“It’s a chopper! A helicopter!” Yuri verified looking through her binoculars. At that point I could still only see a black dot. If it was a helicopter, Mugi could have broadcast our location to it. That’s what he’d been doing when he was vibrating the fine hairs.

“Aa!” Yuri yelped in surprise. She shook the binoculars excitedly. What is it that you saw? Is there something else flying towards us?

“It’s Jeff! Jeff is the pilot!” Yuri shouted. Coming this way, you said?! Jeff, you said?!

I snatched the binoculars from Yuri’s hand. I searched for the helicopter, desperately trying to line up the sights.

Yes, yes, it appeared that Jeff was riding in the helicopter.

“I wonder why Jeff is the one to—” Yuri mumbled.

Please! Of course it’s Jeff coming out here.

We left him behind, remember?

“Take us to my mountain retreat. You know where it is, right? Hurry. There is something I’d like to show you.”

After getting pulled into the helicopter by a rope and sitting down, but before we could even get our seatbelts fastened, the mayor made this hasty request.

“There’s something you’d like to show us?” I asked. “I certainly cannot wait,” I said sarcastically.

Mugi climbed aboard. This was everyone. After shutting the door, Jeff skillfully handled the control stick.

He slowly brought the chopper around. I was disappointed to hear that Jeff hadn’t flown here to rescue me. It was part of his duties as sheriff.

After getting pounded by The Golem and taken to the hospital, Jeff received medical treatment and regained consciousness. He had rested for about three hours, and then went back to his office. This was about the time we were boarding *El Santo*. Then he spent some time cleaning up the office, and during that time he received an emergency bulletin. The call came in from the yacht harbormaster. He said he received a mayday call from a cruiser that was out on an excursion on Lake O’Tana. The mayday was from the ship’s distress beacon. The ship’s computer sends the signal automatically at the first sign of an emergency. At any rate, the first impact we felt was from the exploding submarine, no doubt about it.

Jeff continued flying forward. It was the sheriff’s helicopter, but he kept it on the roof of a nearby building, not his own office.

After getting over Lake O’Tana he’d picked something up on the radar. If the readings were accurate, he had located some object floating approximately one meter above the surface of the lake. He flew there as fast as he could. And that’s where he’d found us drifting in the water.

Hearing this, it was only luck that had brought Jeff to us. What kind of story is that? Of course, I wanted to hear that it was destiny that brought Jeff back to me. Whenever there is an incident or accident, the sheriff always has to go and see.

The mayor’s mountain retreat was outside Aslaville, partway up a small

mountain. From Lake O'Tana it took about ten minutes by helicopter.

I was a little worried we might be attacked while flying, but there were no problems, and we landed safely at the mountain retreat. Jeff let us all out in the retreat's garden.

"All right, then. I'll see you back at the police station..."

With a wave he was about to lift back off into the air.

"You aren't stopping in?" asked the surprised mayor. Did he forget how he'd spoken down to the sheriff in the chopper? It didn't matter how close they were, it was more normal in these kinds of situations to put rank and file aside and try and communicate like human beings.

"Yes, come on. Don't be shy."

I had ulterior motives for wanting to restrain Jeff. But, he politely, but clearly, declined the invitation.

"I can't be gone from my office for very long. It's a burden on the citizens."

It was a line that almost brought a tear to my eye. I know it sounds like I am kidding when I say that, as I am not one to say that sort of thing. But really, that line was so Jeff, and it was dreamy. I couldn't protest, and instantly agreed with what he said.

The chopper rose into the air and disappeared into the blue sky.

"He's a strange one, that sheriff," the mayor said, shrugging his shoulders. The mayor couldn't understand the ways of a true and diligent young man.

We entered the retreat home. We met the stares of a group of sharp men frozen in place. These men must be the security staff I had heard about. They were in plain clothes, but they didn't carry themselves like average citizens.

We passed through the living room. It was a spacious room. It looked like it was mainly used for parties. There were several low tables scattered around the room, and cushions were spread around on the carpet. On the right-hand side was bar and counter. One hundred people could easily assemble here.

"Feel free to make yourselves comfortable," said the mayor. Just to be sure, we avoided going near the windows. We chose a table near the middle of the

room and sat down. Arranging my legs, I leaned over to lie down on a cushion. Aah... this feels nice. With my neck and back still hurting from the ship, I could lie here forever. Mugi scooted in by Yuri and stretched his long body as he lay down.

“Here you go,” the mayor said, looking at us while he fumbled for something behind the bar.

A circular opening appeared in the center of the table. Filled cocktail glasses rose quietly from the opening. I wasn’t expecting alcohol to rise through the hole. But then I realized this would be convenient for when there were a lot of guests.

“Cheers to our safe arrival!” said the mayor, walking over and clinking our glasses.

“With special thanks to Mugi!”

I raised my glass to the one who deserved the most praise. He responded with a long yawn.

“And now...,” said Yuri, after draining her glass in one gulp, “what is it you wanted to show us?”

“This.”

The mayor entered a series of numbers into a panel on the side of the table.

Again, the center of the table opened up. But this time what rose up wasn’t a cocktail glass. It looked like a piece of rock. Long, thin, and cylindrical. It was about two centimeters thick. It was at least ten centimeters long.

“What is this?” I asked.

“About one month ago this was discovered in a mine.”

“It looks like some kind of statue,” said Yuri.

“I call it ‘Angel of Chakra.’ It is a product of a non-human civilization.”

“Non-human? Impossible!”

My face stiffened. I wanted to say that non-human civilizations were no laughing matter. They are certainly incredibly rare. And actual evidence of their

existence is, well, almost non-existent.

“What do you think this figure is made of?” the mayor asked us, turning the tables.

“Stone... is what it looks like to me,” answered Yuri.

“Metal,” said the mayor, shaking his head. “Harder than KZ alloy. And this was manufactured by machine.”

“Wha—!”

We simultaneously swallowed our breaths. We had heard of metals harder than KZ alloy, but never heard of one that strong made mechanically. Our Bloody Card is made of a material stronger than KZ alloy, Tegnoid steel, but it can only be molded using a thermal manufacturing process. On top of that it can only be done at very specialized facilities.

“Now do you understand why I say this is the product of a non-human civilization?”

“Yeah, but the real question is, where did it come from? Someone must have dug that up and given it to you,” said Yuri.

“Not much gets past you,” the mayor said, clapping his hands,

“The person who dug it up was a miner named Galbaldy.”

“Galbaldy?!”

I looked at the mayor.

“That was the man killed in Jeff’s office by the invisible fangs...”

“Yes. The same Galbaldy.”

“Does the owner know about this figure?” Yuri asked.

“Naturally. On top of that, he’s hiding an incredible collection of his own. He’s probably hoping to help Lucifer with this discovery.”

“That’s not good news. Seriously—”

I examined the figure sitting on the table. Nothing about it reminded me of an angel, but it did seem to be modeled after some unknown creature. Was it

possible that the model of this figure and the creature with the invisible fangs could be connected? Or were they completely unrelated? Hmm. Why did it have to be so complicated? All these ideas were getting jumbled in my head.

I was getting flustered. I am not good with complex problems. I prefer simple.

But then it struck me. I remembered something. That's right. It was when the *El Santo* was attacked by the fangs. That time we saw it. If we could understand it clearly, then the conversation would become less complex.

I was about to ask the mayor about it.

But I was interrupted.

A shrill emergency alarm pierced the air.

It sounded with no warning. Unprepared for the loud sound, I jumped a full meter straight into the air.

"Now what?!"

The mayor fiddled with some buttons. A part of the wall across from us changed into a screen. On the screen was the one member of the crack security team we'd seen at the entry.

"It's the master," said the man on the screen. "He brought another thirty people, and now they are making a scene in front of the gate."

"Who is 'the master'?" I asked the mayor.

"Why don't I show you?" said the mayor, changing the view on the screen. On the display was a view of the retreat, in front of the main gate. The retreat was surrounded by a tall wall and a large metal gate. In front of the gate a bizarre-looking crowd of people was assembled. They were all wrapped in white robes.

"In the center of that crowd is a man in a mask."

The mayor zoomed in on the center of the crowd. Indeed, there was a man in a smooth, silver, faceless mask filling the screen.

"This guy, this is the master. He's also known as the leader." Leader! I know that name. Landis mentioned him.

The group yelled a big chant together. The sound came through from a

microphone attached somewhere near the gate.

They were yelling, "Pagans! Begone from this sacred land!"

Master.

First the owner, then the mayor, and now another strange character makes his entrance into this case. Damn. Things just got even more complicated.

6

Total darkness.

It's so dark, I can't see anything. Yuri should be right beside me, but I can't actually see her. Heck, I could stick my hand straight out in front of me, but still wouldn't be sure if it was there or not. Just to make sure, I felt my own face with my hand. It was there, all right. Ooh. Even in this situation, I could keenly feel how cute I was with my fingers. It was a moving new discovery. Okay, so I was being a little narcissistic. Just for a few moments.

"What are you doing?" Yuri asked sourly. "Everything is attached, right?"

I was surprised. How could she see what I was doing? She is usually so dense. It was only at times like this she'd show some kind of special insight. It's really not a desirable quality.

In my head I was answering with all sorts of pointed and vulgar responses, while at the same time I prepared my heatgun. However, what I was really worried about was since we were in the dark, I couldn't see my target. I propped my elbow. I guessed about where the target should be. Mugi, asleep in a comfortable bed inside, would have been able to point out the target to me. Comfortable bed.

Aah. Just the fantasy reminded me how tired I was. I was about to yawn. That could mean inevitable death. Thinking about it, we hadn't slept for about thirty hours straight, standard time. I had taken medicine to help, but every body has its limits. How good it would feel to just lie between some warm sheets and close my eyes...

Those thoughts only brought me closer to slumber.

No. This is not good. C'mon, dummy! Don't sleep!

I scolded myself.

But, it didn't work.

"Snu-nu-nu-nu-nu"

I could hear Mugi's snore rattling inside my head.

My eyes flew open.

At some point I had fallen fast asleep.

I had laid down on a sleeping pad, and my heatgun had fallen from my grasp.

I picked it up and held it again.

"Grrrrr,"

Mugi growled ferociously. He was lying over there somewhere in the darkness, and even though I couldn't see him, I could imagine exactly what he looked like at that moment.

I could see Mugi with his back curled up. When he growls like this, it means the enemy is about to arrive. There was no doubt he wasn't going to walk through the door and shout, "I'm home!" He was close, but whether he would attack from the ceiling or the floor or a wall, wasn't clear. Or if he would even attack or not attack, regardless, we were in the same situation. The only being I know that can distinguish the difference is Mugi.

"Grrrrr," Mugi's growl deepened. Yuri and I held our breath and waited a moment.

I started getting dizzy. Ca-can't make it. And then, another wave of drowsiness—

"GRROAR!" Mugi bellowed once.

At the same time I heard the shrill sound of sheets being torn. The claws of all four paws kicked off the mat. The sound of fangs. Not Mugi's. The attacker's!

The bed was obliterated. Up until now, the same bed that Mugi had been

poised on. I still couldn't see, but I could tell by the sound. It almost sounded like an explosion. My eardrums rang from the noise. The ringing in my ears made me dizzy. Pieces of the mattress landed on me. That poor bed! Destroyed in one chomp.

A pain shot through my finger. It was the ring finger of my left hand. It was giving off a phosphorescent glow.

A signal from Mugi.

I squeezed the trigger of my readied heatgun.

An orange heat beam swirled through the darkness.

I continued to shoot to the side.

Another beam rang out. This time it was from Yuri's heatgun. In certain situations, a ray gun by itself isn't enough, so she'd borrowed a heatgun from the mayor.

Our two beams crossed each other, became intertwined, and scorched the wall and floor.

The room lit up. Rather, the darkness was watered down a little. The features of the room floated faintly in a red light, due to the heat beams and flames. The splintered bed. The scorched wall. The invisible fangs and Mugi scuffling.

Mugi turned. His movements were fast. He was looking straight at us.

Which meant...

The fangs were coming our way!

This was no joke!

I started firing like crazy. I set the space in front of me ablaze. Ya-KUN!

I felt something slam into me.

It was the fangs biting. They were biting into the bed we were using as a shield.

Half of the bed was now ribbons. The next hit was on the other half, and that was a direct hit on where we were.

Still holding on to our shield, we were thrown to the wall. We landed where the floor met the wall.

As we turned around the remains of the bed landed on top of us. Blam.

The two of us were squashed together under the bed.

Thankfully the bed landed mattress down on top of us, rather than the other way around. It was heavy, but we weren't hurt badly.

Getting up would be dangerous, so we remained on the ground and shot our heatguns from under the fallen bed. There was no one else in the room, so our random blasting didn't matter, but if there were they probably would have been burnt to a crisp. It's a little embarrassing, but from that position we looked like a two-headed snapping tortoise.

We were low to the ground, and Mugi bounded between the walls above us and landed.

There was a flash.

That's bright!

Several of the illumination panels in the ceiling suddenly came to life.

Going from almost darkness to super-bright in an instant made my eyes and head pound. Ouch!

Mugi was the one to turn the switch on.

The fangs were gone. Maybe it had escaped through the wall we were shooting at. Since it slipped away, we no longer needed to hide ourselves.

Hoo boy, this room was a disaster area.

The walls were almost completely blackened. The ceiling was well scorched and in the worst spots was melted with gaping holes burned through. Construction was done with fireproof materials, so the fire never spread, but the actual spot where our heatgun blasts and the flames hit took quite a beating. The floor was covered with broken pieces of bed, and it looked like a tornado had blown through the room. The carpet was torn to shreds. There was no trace of any tables or chairs.

“Mgyaa...”

Mugi came over to where Yuri and I were and licked each of our faces. Knucklehead! If you have time for that, why don't you get this damn bed off of us?! I am not going to be happy if I come out of here with a flat chest!

“I was so sure we had him,” said Yuri.

“Not much we can do about it now.”

Even from my squished position I shrugged my shoulders.

“Mgya,”

Mugi nodded his head in agreement. Like he had all the time in the world, Mugi walked over and took the edge of the bed in his mouth. He was going to pull the bed off of us, but acted like it was a real chore. Is it possible he could he move any slower? Where was that Mugi that was bouncing off the walls in the heat of battle? Sorry this isn't as exciting.

Right then.

Out of the blue, there was a knock on the door.

Someone had arrived.

Surprised, we jumped to our feet. This movement sent the bed springing into the air. One of the bed legs caught Mugi's chin.

“Buugya!” Mugi moaned.

The door opened.

A hotel manager entered the room. Behind him stood about five porters. They must have come to see what all the noise was.

The manager looked around the room, his mouth was open, but no words came out.

His eyes were struck wide open, and his body was shaking.

“Wha-what, what... he-he-here...”

He stuttered for about two minutes.

“Well, it pretty much speaks for itself,” I finally said, holding my hands palms

facing up. “Put the damages all on the mayor’s tab, ‘kay? Whatever you do, don’t send the bill to the WWWA. Got it?”

If the chief got a bill for these damages, he would no doubt strangle us.

“The wa-wall... fl-floor...”

The manager was looking anemic.

“You’ve been a terrific help,” I said sarcastically and pushed the manager out of the room and closed the door. You were really lucky. Only one room was damaged. The rest of the hotel is still perfectly safe.

7

After the master and his followers left, we left the mayor’s mountain retreat to stay at a hotel in Aslaville.

It was because I had a feeling that the fangs might make another attack. This time I wanted to put the fangs on the defensive. A complete counterattack.

Hearing this idea, the mayor immediately suggested we stay at the hotel.

No matter what happened, he would take full responsibility, boasted the mayor. He would just be paying for it out of taxes, right? I am not sure why he was acting so proud.

But the mayor saying he would “take full responsibility” made me very happy. We borrowed a car from the mayor and headed into town.

The hotel wasn’t in the center of town, but closer to the outskirts. The Hybrid-Royal Hotel. The name rang of elegant perfection. The mayor said it was Aslaville’s top-class hotel, but would probably be considered a high-mid-tier hotel in a normal city. Of course, that didn’t matter now. I would bet anything it was built by the owner. Knowing his personality, he didn’t spend any money more than needed on service and amenities. We were going to lure out the fangs, so, in fact, a real first-class place would have caused a problem.

We arrived at our room. This room, as well, was at a high-mid-class level. I did

like the fact that it was big and spacious.

After some tea and a couple minutes rest, we got ready for Mr. Fang's visit. We'd eaten and showered at the mayor's retreat, so that wasn't on the to-do list. First we needed the room to be completely pitch black. Since Chakra never got dark, this presented a problem. The door appeared to be airtight, so that wouldn't be an issue, but the windows were going to be a problem. No matter what we did, light still got through. Finally we used a spray putty which was stocked in town and covered all the windows top to bottom. We then let the putty harden. Then we could see how the fanged one did in the dark, and expected that it probably wouldn't be happy with what we had set up.

And with some finishing touches, we had the room perfectly and completely black. We hid in the shadow of the bed, and waited patiently for the fangs' attack. Even in the darkest of darkness, it was easy to see that this room was going to take some damage.

And it got away.

The anticipation and preparation of the second attack was perfection on our part, but what we were missing was the finishing move, the checkmate. Not being able to see it, we had a hard time reacting, but why was it that it tore apart the ship and bed with its teeth? This was a really difficult enemy to put a finger on. But one thing we did learn: the fangs could not take Mugi down. An attack on Mugi resulted in a Mugi fighting back, not the expected easy kill. This might be a key in taking care of this creature.

"Ke-i!" said Yuri. She was sitting down on the half-chomped mattress. She was holding her knees to her chest and her head was tilted to the side.

"So now what do we do? We almost had it. I doubt it'll be showing up for while."

"If we can't get the fangs, then we have to go to that, you know," I answered. "We need to try and figure out what that was."

That was the vision we'd seen when the ship was attacked by the invisible jaws.

Yuri and I saw things as espers. Our power only worked when we were

together, and we saw things as one.

Clairvoyance.

This is our special power. When there is information for us to gather, we fall into a sort of trance. Then in a deep state of ecstasy, a vision floats up from the depths of our consciousness.

From that vision we can see a kernel of information relating to whatever incident is involved.

Unfortunately, our power isn't a perfectly tuned machine. But not being perfect isn't necessarily a bad thing. Maybe clairvoyance isn't the best word. Half-voyance is probably more accurate. We see visions, and see them clearly, but it's usually more of a hint, or a hint of a hint. We are only given subtle fragments. So the real challenge is what to do with the info once we have it. It's like trying to solve a riddle.

What we'd seen when I grabbed Yuri's hand on the yacht was a black egg.

I couldn't tell how big it was. I couldn't tell you if it was an actual egg, or something just in the shape of an egg. It was just a vision of a black egg, but it stood out clearly floating against the white background of our trance.

"I wonder if there is anyone who could help us figure it out," said Yuri as she stared at the ceiling.

"Jeff can help us," I answered a little too quickly. "I wanted to ask him about it earlier, but missed the chance. For questions like this, there is nobody but Jeff to confer with."

"What does he know?" said Yuri, shaking her head. "This doesn't have anything to do with Landis, you know."

"But even then, he helped us search," I rebutted. Any excuse to get back to Jeff was good enough for me. My mind was set. "Even if he doesn't have an answer right off the bat, he'll help us find the solution. If he can give a clue to what it means, what do you have to complain about?"

"I think looking into the owner is going to give us answers faster," Yuri resisted stubbornly. "If he really is a part of Lucifer, if we follow him he won't be

able to keep it hidden for long. Eventually he'll show his true colors, and we'll be right there to see it."

"The owner, huh?" I twisted my head back. "We would have to be incredibly discreet. Don't forget the mayor, who told us his info, I think we should wait and see rather than rush in on this one."

"Hnn," Yuri groaned, her lips tightening.

"Hnn," I growled back, crossing my arms. This is the problem that comes up when trying to manage these little cases.

It was a glaring contest... and Yuri finally folded.

So it was decided, we were going back to Jeff's office. I was about as happy as I had ever been.

With no delay, we were in the car we'd borrowed from the mayor and headed downtown.

But then.

Jeff wasn't at his office.

Since his office was still damaged, all that was there was one ugly-looking repair robot.

"INCIDENT OCCURENCE REPORTED GAUTAMA SECTOR... SHERIFF DEPART TO EMERGENCY... LAST COMMUNICATION 17 MINUTES 20 SECONDS AGO... PLEASE TRUST ME WITH URGENT COMMUNICATION... MESSAGE DELIVERED UPON SHERIFF RETURN..."

The robot's voice sounded like a child with no intonation, and it would deliver communications in the same manner. We really couldn't leave a message about the black egg like this.

We returned to the car in dejection.

"Where could the Gautama sector be," I wondered aloud.

"This car doesn't have an auto-navi," said Yuri as she examined the dashboard from the passenger seat. "We can't go to a place if we don't know where it is!"

"Then let's go to a place we do know."

“Where would that be?”

“The owner’s place.”

“Waa—” Yuri fell forward across the console. “What happened to all that talk about discretion?!” she snarled, popping back into her seat at lightning speed.

“If Plan A fails, move to Plan B. That’s just common sense, right?” I asked unperturbed.

Score one more for Kei.

8

We didn’t go the Salvatore, but rather to the Chakra Development Company headquarters, or CDC for short. This was the owner’s main base of operations, at least according to the mayor. We understood that at night he worked out of Salvatore, but normally Telestofarnus could be found at the CDC headquarters building in the “Owner’s Room.” If we believed what the mayor told us, then we could consider that place to be Lucifer’s Chakra branch office.

The headquarters building was smack in the center of Aslaville.

It wasn’t far from downtown at all. But, that doesn’t mean it was a short trip. It was a hard-to-get-to location. It was surrounded by a beautifully manicured park, with a one kilometer radius and no other structures around. Between the grass and the trees, it is completely blanketed in rich greens, making a truly breathtaking sight. It looked richer and more beautiful than the mayor’s residence or the Chakra government offices.

“It’s gorgeous...”

Yuri let out a sigh at the sight of the gardens.

“It doesn’t fit with that chubby guy.”

Thinking about how it would fit better with Jeff soured my mood. Along the drive to the CDC headquarters building through the park I swore under my breath from the driver’s seat. The front of the headquarters building rose up

ahead, lording over its surroundings. It was an eight-story cylindrical building. Aslaville has not even one high-rise building. And there is a good reason for that. The ground was weak. When Aslaville was reclaimed the ground was treated with a resin, but even still, the planet's crust remained brittle. This condition is excellent for mining minerals, but not very conducive to human living. The fifteen thousand people who had moved here couldn't be expected to live in their simple rental homes for decades and decades on end. They did some developing and came up with codes and restrictions on building structures. A part of those was tight restrictions on building heights.

"Take a right there," said Yuri.

The road split to the right and left. In front of the entrance to the headquarters building the road turned into a giant loop. The loop began where our car was, directly opposite of the entrance.

Getting out of the car, we walked up the wide but short grayish-white stone staircase. Mugi, who had stayed in the car at Jeff's office, got out with us here.

We entered the lobby.

It was a grand vaulted hall. In the center hung a five-meter-tall crystal chandelier and on the walls were intricately crafted tapestries. It looked like some sort of palace. As expected, the scale was slightly smaller, but you get the idea.

To the left was the information booth. The booth itself was made up of elaborate woodcut panels. I peered closer hoping to spy some ripe young hunk, but all I saw were two fake-looking women looking at us, trying to hide their giggling. The two of them looked a little older than the two of us. We are both nineteen years old, so they were probably twenty-one or twenty-two. They both had model-class looks and figures, though not quite meeting my level of excellence. Even on this remote planet they were able to find staff of this caliber. No doubt these girls were paid well. Or could it be they were members of Lucifer, too? Either way, it didn't matter. All I knew for sure was that they weren't giving Yuri, Mugi, and me a very warm welcome. Their faces were twitching from their giggles.

We stood in front of the booth's window.

“The owner in?” I asked calmly, flipping open my WWWA ID.

“One moment please.”

One girl started clicking buttons on her keyboard smoothly.

“I am afraid he is out right now,” she answered after a few moments.

“We’d like to see him soon,” said Yuri from my side. “Can you tell us where we can find him?”

“I will ask and see.”

Her fingers drifted effortlessly over the keyboard again. Her eyes seemed to be focused on a screen which fed her the information we needed, but couldn’t see ourselves.

She looked up at us.

“I am sorry to have to ask, but please inquire with that person over there.”

She pointed to somewhere to the side of the booth. The adjacent wall was a video screen.

The screen flickered to life.

The face of an arrogant-looking middle-aged man filled the screen.

“Okay, so, you WWWA TCs...”

It wasn’t just his face with the sour attitude. His intonation was snide, too.

“You are not privy to the owner’s whereabouts and I am not obliged to tell you. So, why don’t you hurry back through the door you came in?”

Textbook answer. As nice as the place looked, it didn’t take long to see the level of the people behind the façade. Put a pig in a tuxedo...

The screen went black.

“Say, Yuri,” I said, turning to her. “It’s kind of a waste, don’t you think?”

I glanced up at the five-meter-tall chandelier.

“It is a waste, Kei,” she replied, her eyes dancing over the scene.

“But, sometimes it can’t be helped.”

That's right. Sometimes it can't be helped. Especially if your enemy is Lucifer.

We each pulled out a small capsule from pockets in our hot pants.

"If I were you, I'd get down and get my head under a desk or something."

Yuri was kind enough to warn the girls in the information booth. The girls in the booth gave bewildered looks, not catching what Yuri was trying to say.

Yuri and I flicked the capsules from our fingers to the center of the hall.

Explosion.

A huge red torch rose up as an ear-piercing boom rang through the lobby. The explosion created a shockwave which rattled the walls.

The chandelier exploded into a million pieces.

The shards scattered all across the lobby floor.

"Kyaa!"

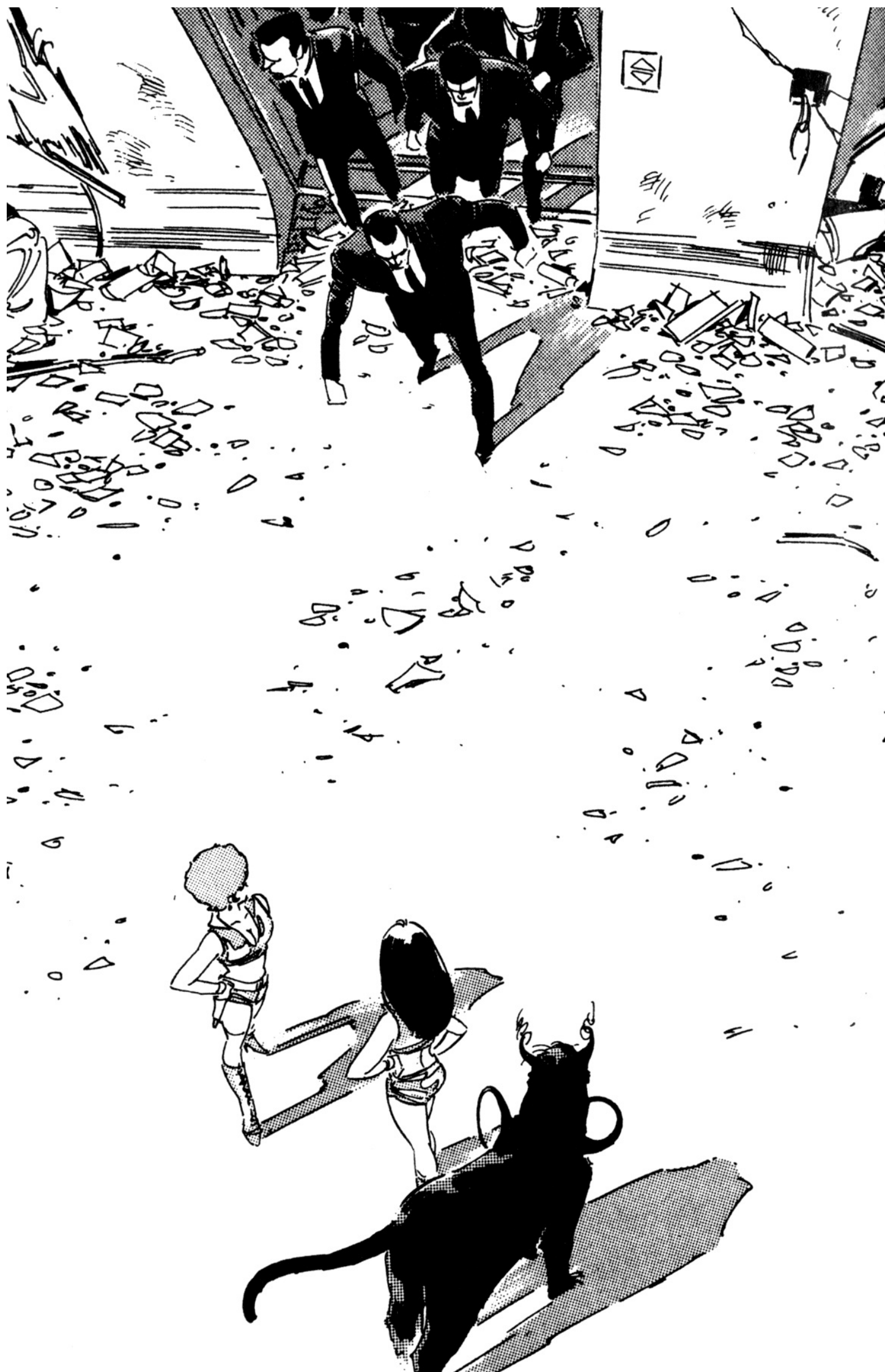
The information-booth girls screamed in unison.

Of course, Yuri and I had pressed ourselves against the closest wall.

A crack ran across the ceiling, and the walls started to crumble. Anything glass broke. The beautiful tapestries fell with the walls that held them.

"What in the hell...!"

From the elevator about ten tough guys in black suits came storming out. The guy on the screen we'd just talked to was one of them.



The men took a quick look at the lobby, and seemed to all gulp simultaneously. A split-second later Yuri and I stepped forward.

“Did you two bitches do this?!” yelled one of the men after noticing us. What a mouth on this guy!

My answer was to pull out my heatgun and squeeze the trigger.

The heat ray scorched the floor.

The potty-mouthed dude was petrified.

“Kei and Yuri from the WFWA were simply asking the location of the owner,” I said.

I fired another shot from the heatgun. Just to make sure the point was clear, Mugi issued a growl.

“Ple-please stop.”

The man from the screen felt compelled to raise his hand. His facial expression told me that he probably needed to change his underwear.

“The owner is dealing with an incident in the Gautama sector right at this moment. I understand he is taking care of that. Right now communications are blocked. We are unable to contact him at this time.”

“Incident?”

“In Gautama sector?”

Yuri and I looked at each other. That’s where Jeff was, too.

“What sort of incident?” I asked the man.

“I understand there was a landslide, but I don’t know any details. I just know he went there right after hearing about it.”

“I see,” I said nodding.

No matter how we played it, where we needed to be was the Gautama sector.

“Last question,” Yuri stated calmly.

“Yes, you name it,” replied the man enthusiastically.

“Where the hell is the Gautama sector?”

That’s the question I was waiting for.

9

After receiving detailed directions to the Gautama sector we returned to the car. It was a slightly drastic measure, but we’d been able to fix the guy’s attitude problem. It’s never too late in life to learn a valuable lesson. We drove around the loop and drove away from the CDC headquarters building. Making it back through the beautiful park, we got on the highway toward the outskirts. Since we didn’t have an auto-navi, we had to watch the highway signs and make sure we didn’t miss our exit, which was a pain. Yuri was looking up, pulling back her black hair.

That’s when it happened.

A voice was broadcast out of the communicator.

The incoming-call signal didn’t even go on. Suddenly there was a voice.

“This is the mayor. Kei, Yuri, can you hear me?”

The static was awful, and he sounded wound up, but this was definitely the mayor’s voice. Surprised, I turned sharply and the car swerved.

“You’re gonna kill us!” Yuri shouted angrily. This was no time to start filing complaints.

“Mayor, this is Kei. What’s wrong?” I answered. There was no image on the video screen.

“Oh, am I getting through?”

The mayor’s voice sounded relieved.

“Mayor, where are you hailing us from? The connection is pretty bad, so just give us the basics,” I told him.

“I am on my way to the Gautama sector,” he replied. “There’s been an

accident at Mine #4. I hear it's pretty bad."

Mine #4! Accident!

So that's what was going on in Gautama. It was a problem at a mine. We'd gotten the directions from the guy at the headquarters building, but we should have asked for this info, too.

"I'm in a plane, so I'll be there momentarily. Please, come as soon as you can. It's possible this has something to do with the case."

"We're already on our way!"

I gave him the short version of our visit to the CDC headquarters building. When he heard how the lobby was left in ruins, it suddenly got quiet on the mayor's end.

"But it will take us some time to get there," I said. "We're in a slow six-wheeler and there is no auto-navi. I guarantee we are going to get lost once we exit the highway."

"No need to worry," said the mayor. "You can use the communicator as an auto-navi. It's set up so you can get directions directly from satellite. Turn to channel 18 and input code 28291. If you do that the screen will give you a bird's-eye view of the area. You can check by voice where you are."

"Cool! Why didn't you tell us about this before?"

"Sorry. I forgot," the mayor apologized.

Yuri quickly switched the communicator to navigation mode.

"All right, I'll see you when you get there. Maybe, that... can make it... I think."

"Maybe?"

"...is ...at ...won't..."

The static interference worsened.

"Mayor, wait!"

"..."

Nothing got through. Turning the volume up didn't help, it was nothing but

noise.

“It’s no use,” I said, giving up.

“Let’s just hurry up and get there,” said Yuri. She was a hundred percent right. The map was set, all I had to do was hit the gas and the car would take us to the Gautama sector.

I pushed the pedal in as far as it would go.

However—

This was Chakra.

Nothing is ever easy or direct.

We never would have imagined the obstacles that got in our way.

The Gautama sector was an incredible place. The mayor came in by plane, Jeff got there using his special helicopter, and no doubt the owner had some kind of jet to get there. My burning desire to get there was starting to wane.

The road was a road in name only. The three-meter-wide expanse was lined with vertical cliffs on either side.

We bounced our way down the path. The car was set to automatic drive so we didn’t have a chance to try and stop it. We stared ahead blankly without saying a word. From the time we got off the highway, I knew something wasn’t quite right. The road was unusually rough, and it got increasingly narrow.

All of a sudden we were climbing a slope which got more and more steep. The grass and trees disappeared and we bounced around over the bumpy mountain road. Looking down, the cliff was just under us. And it wasn’t just some ten or twenty meter little drop-off. There was nothing for hundreds of meters straight down.

Along this road our car was plugging along at just over 100 kilometers an hour.

In a panic, I went to turn off the auto-drive and reached out to hit the button on the dashboard, but my finger stopped just in front of the switch.

Of course, if I were to put it into manual, would I be able to navigate this

road?

The answer was no.

What I ended up doing was setting the acceleration to about 30 kilometers slower.

We left the rest up to the car.

We crawled our way along the mountain road.

Yuri and I made a point of not looking outside. We put our seats back and passed the time staring at each other. I was actually kind of sleepy, exerting all that energy earlier had wiped me out.

We were only going up one mountain, but it was taking more time than we had to waste.

We reached the summit of the ridge.

The car stopped there. I was scared to look, but we would have to see what the conditions outside the car were. Yuri and I cautiously peeked up, stretching our necks to the window.

The cliff was no longer there.

Or at least we couldn't see it if it was. We weren't on the road, but had stopped in the center of a wide and open space. Looking out the left side of the car, it appeared that the cliff might still be off the edge of the open area, but on the right was a rocky mountain. At the base of that mountain of rock was a hole, a tunnel, leading in.

Just by looking at it, it didn't look like a particularly sturdy tunnel. Over the entrance an engraved plaque with the number "1" on it had been mounted.

This was Mine #1.

So, we really had arrived at the mines.

Basically, we had made it to the Gautama sector. That's why the car stopped where it did.

But, according to the mayor, the incident had happened at Mine #4.

This was not where we wanted to be. We weren't there yet. Next we would

have to descend along the edge of that dreaded cliff.

Just thinking about it gave me goose bumps.

I wanted to set the speed at five kilometers per hour. Unfortunately at that rate it would take us five days to get there.

“What are we gonna do?”

I looked at Yuri.

“Yeah, what are we gonna do?”

Yuri looked beat, too. “I wonder if #4 is that way...”

I turned my head to look where she meant. Beyond Mine #1.

And then at the same time.

Her face shone a bright white light.

“Aa!” I screamed.

But it wasn't Yuri's face emitting the light, but a reflection from outside the car window.

There was a flash from the other side of the mountain.

The flash came in the shape of a gigantic circular ring.

It was bright white, and it spun as it swelled and only faded as it reached the blue sky.

Ouch, that's bright! I was not able to look straight at it.

And then it disappeared.

It all happened over the space of a moment.

The flash was there, then a moment later was gone, and the blue sky returned.

“That, right now...” said Yuri, turning to me. “What was that, that just happened?”

What are you doing asking me?

Do you think I have any idea what the hell just happened?

shakes. crumbles. shakes again!

“Gaooo!”

Mugi suddenly growled. He popped up from the rear seat and his ears stood up straight (strictly speaking they weren’t actually ears, but they looked like ears, so it was just easier to call them that).

He stuck his face up to the window on the left-hand side, his eyes darted around wildly.

His eyes then became fixed on one spot.

“Mgyau,” he cried this time. Raising his right front paw, he patted the window up and down.

Look there, he was saying.

“What is it?” I asked, trying to turn and look from the cramped driver’s seat. I twisted and got my head right next to Mugi’s.

“I”

I wouldn’t have believed it if I didn’t see it myself.

Right opposite us. Near the horizon, where the aquamarine-colored sky had turned white. There was a small silver cross shining there in the sky.

The cross was gradually growing larger, as it did it began to develop a distinctive form.

An airplane. It looked like something similar to an airplane. The wings were short, and the fuselage was stumpy and wide. It was a small-type airplane.

And it was flying straight for us.

“Yuri, that’s it!” I called to Yuri sitting in the front passenger seat.

“Wha—?”

Yuri turned around.

Pushing me out of the way, she gazed through the window.

“Pegasus V-II...”

That must be what kind of plane it was. Hearing the name, I remembered seeing it in a catalog or magazine somewhere. If I wasn’t mistaken, the Pegasus V-II was an eight-passenger VTOL.

“There is something weird about this Pegasus,” said Yuri. “It’s really flying strange, at an angle.”

I’d noticed that, too. At first I thought it was circling around, but that wasn’t the case. It looked like the fuselage might have taken some damage, and the plane was bouncing up and down and every which way as it flew.

The plane got closer, and began to wind around the mountain summit we were on from our left. Even though it was flying at a slant it wasn’t quite on the verge of crashing. Its altitude simply wasn’t rising.

“Wonder what he’s trying to do,” I said. “You don’t think he’ll try and land here, do you?”

“It’s not impossible,” Yuri said after quickly surveying the open area. “The wing might clip our car if he tries to land here, or he might possibly have enough space on the ravine floor.”

That wasn’t the answer I was hoping to hear.

The Pegasus roared closer. I could see the fuselage clearly. Its registration number. Blue and red lines. The words MANDALA and CHAKRA.

“Ugao,” Mugi roared again.

He glared at the Pegasus and bared his fangs.

Zuun, the muscles in his neck tightened. His black fur stood on end, and his feelers started waving about.

The tendril-like hair where his ears should be began to vibrate. This always

happened when he was manipulating electromagnetic waves or electric currents. Mugi's whiskers would flex back and forth at an incredible speed.

"!"

Yuri's body stiffened.

I was surprised, too.

Suddenly the Pegasus went into a steep turn.

It was almost a 180 degree turn. It's not a move often pulled off by thick-bodied VTOLs. Sweeping over the mountain's surface, the Pegasus seemed to prepare to land.

And then the next moment.

The mountain cracked open.

It wasn't a natural phenomenon. And it wasn't an explosion.

From the mountain's side, the giant invisible jaws.

The fangs!

The fangs were trying to get the Pegasus. Detecting this, Mugi took control of the Pegasus and rolled it. The fangs missed their target, and had come down on the rocky mountain, instead.

Mugi is incredible, but so were these invisible fangs!

"Unh!"

Yuri kicked open the car door.

Unholstering the heatgun from her belt, Yuri took aim.

Naturally, I couldn't be left behind. I jumped to the ground and laid down flat and squeezed the trigger of my heatgun.

The two of us lit the mountain up. Mugi still had control of the Pegasus.

Since we couldn't see our enemy, we filled the air with our fiery blasts. Everywhere we thought it might be.

The faded surface of the mountain turned as black as charcoal.

The fangs did not strike back.

Under Mugi's control, the Pegasus landed in the open area. One wing rested on top of our car. But thanks to Mugi's careful maneuvering, the damage was insignificant. The wing landed softly across the car's roof.

We stopped firing our weapons. It seemed like the fangs dispersed after that one big bite. Maybe it left because Mugi was there.

I stood up. Yuri was starting toward the Pegasus, now on the ground. I wasn't aiming at the airplane, but I did keep my finger on the trigger.

The hatch slowly opened.

My back stiffened.

Above the gangway a human shadow rose.

It exited the plane.

Oh! Well, I'll be...

I suddenly relaxed.

What do you know?

Well, if it wasn't the mayor!

"No, thanks. You really helped me out there. Ho ho ho!" said the mayor as he gave the nearby Yuri an exaggerated hug. He then grabbed her hand and shook it way too hard. I hid myself in the shadow of the car. I am not kidding. When I get near emotional guys like that, I seriously break out in hives.

"When the plane did a sudden bank, I didn't know what to think, but I was really surprised. Again with the fangs..."

The mayor spoke loudly, gesturing with both hands.

Five members of his staff exited the plane and formed a line, their eyes showing no pleasure at the situation. One of them must have also been the pilot. He wasn't wearing a shirt.

"Weren't you already at Mine #4?" I asked the mayor.

"Yes," the mayor said nodding. "We landed about three hours ago. But the

owner quickly blocked access to the accident at Mine #4.”

“Blocked access?”

“Nobody can enter. Even the sheriff was restricted from entry.”

“Even Jeff...”

I tried to surmise what the mayor was trying to tell us. But I didn’t have enough information, and couldn’t read what he wanted us to do.

“We disputed his blocking us, but he wouldn’t budge. So we decided to try and take a look at the scene from the air.”

“And then there was that giant white flash from the mine,” Yuri interrupted.

“That’s right. But how did you...”

The mayor blinked, his eyebrows raised.

“We could see it,” answered Yuri. “It was on the other side of this mountain. The flash rose up, and then faded away.”

“What was it?” I asked.

“I’d like to know as much as you would,” said the mayor, shaking his head. “We were about 500 meters above the ground when it happened and the shock was incredible. It felt like we slammed into a giant wall. It’s a miracle we didn’t crash. But we did take some heavy damage. Thanks to this guy’s flying we made it out of there.”

“An explosion?”

“A kind of one, maybe.”

“But there was no sound and no smoke,” said Yuri. “Just a big ball of light spreading in the sky.”

“From the air we could see down to the mine.”

“And what did you see,” I said leaning closer in.

“Nothing.”

His answer sounded like it reverberated from the lowest depths of Hell.

“—the mine, the buildings, the drilling equipment, the mountain of rocks, all

of it. All of it gone. Nothing remained.”

“What about people? Jeff? Did you escape together?”

My voice shook as I asked.

“Jeff was there and the owner was there. Along with several miners.”

“Mugi!” I called out to the Mugi.

“Mgya?”

He came to my side.

“Let me get on your back. Let’s get to that mountain. And fast. Like now!” I said facing Mugi. By the time I was done speaking I was already on his back.

I put my arms around his thick neck.

Mugi took off running. With incredible power and speed he ran straight up the mountain of stone.

Kicking off rocks, we left a dusty trail of flying dirt, and Mugi and I arrived at the spot in one, maybe two minutes. My legs were wobbly and I couldn’t immediately stand.

To prevent myself from collapsing, I sat down on a big round rock. Just below my eyes I saw a horrible scene.

The mayor hadn’t lied. It was exactly as he had said. First of all, where there should have been a continuation of a zig-zagging chain of mountains, it appeared that one mountain had been plucked up and taken away.

One entire mountain.

Now there was a gigantic crater.

A diameter of five kilometers. No, more like six. No. More.

The bottom of the crater was as smooth as a mirror. It reflected a bright tan. This didn’t look like the planet’s surface. If this was a fantasy story I could say it looked as if some giant took a huge ice cream scoop and scooped out a piece of the planet, and then lined the crater with a thin metal foil.

The far side of the crater was hazy. I wondered if it wasn’t fog making it hard

to see. I could no longer see the edge of the crater.

It was like the wasteland or mountain range was stretching away farther, but I couldn't really tell with my bare eyes.

"Jeff,"

His name slipped from my tongue.

"Jeff..."

That's all I could say.

The handsome sheriff, Jeff, was gone.

2

At the mountain summit I stood frozen in shock. I couldn't remain seated, and I couldn't scream. My mind went blank, my brain stopped processing. I just stood. I faced the crater, but I wasn't looking at anything. My trance wasn't totally complete, but about as close as you can get.

I was in a haze. Both literally and figuratively. Everything was white. Was it my surroundings... was it my mind... was it... me...

That's the condition I was in, I don't know for how long.

It felt like a very long time, but later I found out it was only for about ten plus seconds.

There was a sudden tear in the blank space.

I felt a shock push against my legs.

A wave ran through the ground, and the G-force felt like it might crush me.

An incredible boom sounded.

The next moment I was floating in the air.

I landed on my tailbone.

"!"

I couldn't speak. An intense pain ran from my hips to the top of my head.

This was a truly agonizing scene.

I writhed, gasping for breath.

There—

A second shock came.

I was tossed up again. This time toward a neighboring mountainous slope.

Head first.

It would be instant death.

I frantically grabbed my knees to roll into a ball.

I landed on my back.

I had the wind knocked out of me.

My bones creaked an unpleasant sound. A spark shot through the back of my closed eyes, and a numbness spread through my entire body.

Oh, this is better.

The pain was so bad that in a way it felt good. I didn't know I could feel that.

As I was thinking these stupid thoughts, my body started to slide. I was head down on a steep slope. I should have been able to grab something with my hands or feet, but since the ground was loose, anything I got a hold of just came down the slope with me. I wasn't able to stop. Slowly but surely I went down the slope.

Eventually I made a conclusion about what was happening.

Was this not an earthquake?!

Tremors shook. The rocky mountain shook loosely. No, it was a strong shaking. That's more accurate. It grew to a violent vertical shaking. I wanted to get up and stop sliding down the hill, but every time I tried to stand, I only slipped more. What was even worse, was now all the rocks and things were thrown about, so there was nothing I could use to slow my fall. The only question was how long and far would I go down the surface of the mountain.

“Gyaoan!”

Mugi roared. I rolled over. From the edge of my vision I could see Mugi’s jet-black figure.

He was coming to help. Over here! Bouncing with the rhythm of the tremors he jumped in great strides without slipping and falling, galloping closer to me.

Krrck!

The rocks were breaking. Right below me.

The mountain was splitting open. Kyaa! A chasm in the ground. The chasm would swallow me up.

I spread my arms and legs out as far as I could to fight from falling in. But, it was no use. Once I had tapped all my strength, I would crumble into the hole.

No! I didn’t want it to end like this.

Mugi flew.

He wedged himself between my back and the growing fissure.

His long tail reached my arm. I grabbed onto his tail and rolled onto my side. Pulling me onto his back, Mugi jumped.

The momentum forced me to lean forward on my stomach. Both hands hugged Mugi’s torso, and, straddling Mugi’s back, I clung for my life.

Stones, large and small, were tossed into the air all around us.

Mugi was struck several times in the abdomen. But Mugi never complained. He coolly made his way down the mountain.

Even though Mugi maintained his burden of me on his back all the way to the open space crowded with our car and the VTOL, it took a blink of the eye to get there.

I noticed a tunnel had formed at the front. Many fallen rocks were scattered around the tunnel’s entrance. Some had rolled as far as two meters. But it seemed the earthquake had finally stopped. The planet’s surface was no longer trembling and no new rocks were falling down.

I was swept with a wave of relief and I took a deep breath and pressed my

face into Mugi's fur.

The base of Mugi's tail was there.

Mugi's face wasn't.

Just to be sure, I stretched my neck out. On the other side of Mugi's tail was Mugi's rear end.

I concluded that I was facing backward. I hadn't even realized that when I jumped onto Mugi's back that I was going the wrong direction.

This position did not fit into my beauty profile.

I tried to dismount as quickly as I could.

My foot got twisted.

I lost my balance and fell shoulder first.

Once again, sparks flew. This time it didn't reach the weird pleasurable feeling. It just hurt.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

I tried to get up as I moaned in pain. It was because Mugi wasn't helping me up.

His shoulders raised up, and he scowled as he stared ahead.

I saw legs. They were strange-looking legs. It looked like they were dressed in thick tights for pants. The shoes, if that's what you would call them, looked to be made of metal.

Had I seen this person before?

Wondering this, I tried to look up.

What I saw was someone wearing what looked like a medieval helmet and armor with a sword at his side. In his hand he held a narrow pistol of some kind.

That armor! That figure!

Unbelievable! Wasn't this the same getup those "shadows" that had destroyed Damp Yu were wearing?

"Kei!" Yuri called out to me from somewhere.

“Yuri?”

I frantically looked around.

“Uwa!”

It was right when I looked up. Another armored warrior fell from the sky.

This one crashed into the one that was standing in front of me.

Both were laid out on the ground, broken.

There was no sound of metal-on-metal. This told me that these armored soldiers were the same as the “shadow” types we’d seen, and were wearing armor that only looked like metal. But these ones were much weaker than those “shadows.”

“Kei!” Yuri called again. I looked around for a second time.

There she was.

On top of one of the Pegasus’ wings. With her heatgun readied and her back to the white sun, she stood up confidently.

She sprang into the air.

She landed lightly, like a bird, just to my side.

Grr... That wasn’t cool. Not cool at all. Why am I falling off of Mugi’s back and Yuri is flying around like a gymnast?!

“Kei! Behind you!”

Yuri pointed behind the embarrassed and shrinking me.

“Wha—?”

And then right when I turned around...

“Hyaa!”

The armored warrior with the sword turned to me and thrust his blade.

At the same time Yuri blasted a beam from her heatgun into his gut.

“Wha-wha-wha—?”

My eyes spun around like crazy.

“These are the guys that attacked us, once the earthquake stopped!” Yuri said hurriedly. “They got two men, but the mayor is safe. Hey! Snap out of it and get ready to shoot back! Without you we’re toast!”

Did she? What?!

I snapped my heatgun from its holster as I let out a deep breath. There was no time right now for tears and regrets.

3

There were eight armored warriors remaining. According to what Yuri’d said, they’d taken care of about six of them before I got there, so it seemed like there was a large number of them that suddenly appeared in this open space.

A burst of pulse beams rained down.

We rolled out of the way and jumped to the rear of the car to avoid the beams. The type of weapon the armored warriors were using were long-range automatic laser guns. You didn’t see these in close-range battles. That’s probably what they had the swords for. Those were more than likely specially made electromagnetic sabers.

I kept my back up against the rear wheel. It appeared that the armored soldiers were circling the open area. They had reached just outside the spot where I’d so gracefully dismounted Mugi. Our Mugi had sensed an abnormality and dove into the ring of circling warriors. He returned glares from a number of armored soldiers. Dumb cat! Why couldn’t you move when I needed you? That was a close one, you know!

“It’s a pretty close match with the security staff here,” whispered Yuri after crawling over to my side. “The heatguns work well on a frontal attack, but ray guns won’t help us at all here. They’d only work if we could hit a joint, and even then, who knows? They still won’t give us enough damage. If these guys are anything like the ‘shadows’ we saw before, then we are in deep trouble.”

I got it now. The security staff has nothing but ray guns. Thinking about it,

even though Yuri had borrowed a heatgun from the mayor, disaster still loomed over the collective group.

Pow pow pow... a barrage of bright beams flew. Before my eyes threads of light shot back and forth. Both sides were using ray guns. Understanding their disadvantage, the security staff was doing what they could to rise to the challenge.

I poked my head around the side of the car to see what the situation looked like.

At the same time, a barrage of pulse beams aimed at me came flying my way.

One of the beams grazed my cheek. With a high-pitched squeal the polymer evaporated.

“Hot! Hot! How-ch!”

I pulled my head back in a panic.

That was close. Shoosh. I really shouldn’t be so reckless. Up until a minute ago I could have stood up and not been shot at. Suddenly a strange beast came over the summit of the mountain. Its unexpected arrival must have taken the other side by surprise, as well This was actually to our advantage.

I got very interested in this new development.

“Ugraawr!”

From somewhere, Mugi let out a ferocious roar.

That growl.

He was angry. Really angry. He was in a rage. One of the armored warriors must have shot Mugi with a laser gun. He must not know Mugi’s penchant for slicing through flesh. Mugi has been acclimated to live with people, but when he gets angry, pre-domesticated Mugi rears his head. When he gets in that mode a hundred United Space Force Special Elite troops couldn’t contain him.

“No way! Cool!”

I heard Yuri squealing from somewhere above my head.

I looked up to see that at some point Yuri had climbed up the body of the car.

Lying across the roof, she looked out onto what was happening. Hmph, how'd she get so smart? Surely she had her heatgun out and ready. From up there it would be easy to fall back, and she had a good view of the enemy's movements. Not to be left out, I grabbed onto a protrusion on the car's body to pull myself up.

I hiked up my long slender leg to push myself up onto the roof. But right then!

"Aa!"

Yuri let out a little scream.

"They're coming! That way!"

She pointed a finger my way.

They're coming? Who's coming?

As Yuri said those words I immediately turned around to see. If enemies were on their way, I couldn't be caught in this precarious position. This was no time to be reckless.

Quickly I let go of the car.

Wait, wait, wasn't my leg still perched up on the car?

My field of vision spun around. I was just under a meter from the ground.

Again, I fell tailbone first.

Intense pain. Scream.

Crying, I pulled myself up. Not wanting to be chomped, I whipped out my heatgun.

"Don't shoot!" Yuri yelled, stopping me. I looked up. This same Yuri was blasting away with her own heatgun like crazy.

"Umigyaa!"

A black mass rolled up in front of me. I jumped back, but was still in the black ball's path. It grazed me and did a U-turn.

It was Mugi. It was Mugi coming our way. But, it wasn't Mugi alone. Someone was hanging onto his back. A slender man in a gray suit was straddling Mugi's

back and had his hands around his neck.

It was the mayor.

He timidly lifted his head from Mugi's back. He was a ghastly shade of pale. His hair was mussed up and his eyes were bloodshot.

"What in the world happened?" I asked the mayor.

"It was no use," he said, shaking his head. "The enemy got a fresh supply of troops. About twenty men. They got Burmis. And Leagan is injured. We were no match."

"Chk..."

I snapped my tongue. The armored warriors had reinforcements. This was the worst case scenario. And now we had to take care of the mayor, too. Protecting this twig of a man would take a lot of work.

The security staff would need to at least help out with that part.

I looked into the mayor's eyes, then at the Pegasus. The VTOL was in bad shape, but not completely out of commission.

"Mayor," I said. "You know how to fly that thing?"

"If it is just flying, then I have a license for that. But—"

"Okay!" I said quickly, cutting him off. If he had a license, then he had experience. The rest was up to luck.

"Mugi, get the mayor on to the Pegasus!"

"Wai-wait..."

No time for chitchat or protests.

With the mayor still on his back, Mugi jumped into the air. Yuri and I protected ourselves with our heatguns.

From the roof of the car Mugi jumped onto the wing of the Pegasus, then using his feelers, he lifted the mayor up. After opening the hatch, he tossed the skinny body of the mayor in.

"Gyaa!"

There was a bloodcurdling scream telling us that the mayor had made it aboard. At the same time Mugi stowed the gangway and shut the hatch.

Mugi turned around and returned to my side. Staring at the Pegasus, the fine hair where his ears should be started to oscillate.

The Pegasus' engine started. Yuri jumped from on top of the car. We both got low to the ground. The engine sound began to rise in pitch. The hot wind from the jets swirled around.

"Yuri!" I yelled, turning to her. Her face was right in front of mine, but the engine noise was too loud. If I didn't shout she wouldn't be able to hear me.

"Once the Pegasus lifts off, we run to the tunnel. If we can attack from there, it's closer to a one-on-one battle!"

"Gotcha!" Yuri shrieked back. The Pegasus began to float. The landing gear went slack, and finally separated from the ground. Sand and dust blew up and danced in the air, and for a moment the whole scene was pure white. As the Pegasus rose it was surrounded by its own sandstorm. It was hard to keep my eyes open. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't even make out the Pegasus' form.

The engine sound shifted to a pitch higher.

It changed into a deafening metallic sound.

This sound slowly got quieter.

It was because it was gaining altitude. The wind from the exhaust was not shooting laterally, but straight down.

Now!

I tapped Yuri's shoulder and stood up.

I still couldn't see clearly, but the mine was close. I had a good idea of where it was.

We sprinted across the open area with all our might.

The Pegasus was in the distance. The wind died down, and the sand and dust settled back to the ground. The tunnel entrance was now visible to us.

Which meant...

The armored warriors could see us, too.

We flew into the tunnel entrance, and twisted to land with our backs to the tunnel wall.

That was close. As we pressed ourselves behind the wall, a flurry of laser blasts lit up the entrance to the mine.

The dark tunnel was briefly lit up in white light. The rocks around the opening created by the earthquake were glowing a bright red, and were starting to melt.

4

The downpour of laser bolts lasted for one or two minutes. There was nothing for us to do at that time but to wait it out and hope for the best. We couldn't move, much less counter. We could have moved down the wall farther down the tunnel, but there wouldn't have been much purpose to that. A better plan was to wait for the enemy to get careless. In any case, the steaming mad Mugi was still outside the mine.

Waiting for them to come to us was the way to go. For a moment I thought they were calling us out, but that didn't seem to be the case. There seemed to be a lot of movement outside. It got really noisy.

After a while we made our way back to the entrance, and avoiding the still-red and very hot melted rocks we took a peek outside.

The first thing I saw was something engulfed in a deep crimson flame. It was our six-wheeled car. The armored warriors must have set it on fire. The flames roared into the sky.

I then noticed Mugi just in front of me. The armored soldiers had surrounded Mugi. The red flames reflected against his bristled black fur, and he bore the look of a fierce and angry god. The four soldiers laid out on the ground near Mugi must have gotten too close. They weren't moving, or for that matter, breathing. Still, there were over twenty uninjured armored warriors remaining. Whether they were dead or behind the burning car, I wasn't sure, but the

mayor's security staff was nowhere to be seen.

Three warriors from the circle of armored soldiers stepped forward. None of the warriors held laser guns. They carried their swords in their hands. That's how close they were. It appeared that they realized their laser guns were no match for Mugi's speed.

When they got about two meters from Mugi, they stopped their advance.

That's really close.

Suddenly he jumped up.

Mugi was on his hind legs.

Mugi shoved the three armored shadows into one big pile.

Or so you would think at first.

Mugi's lightning-quick sharp claws sliced through the three armored warriors, their bodies fell in pieces into a pile on the ground.

There was no contest, no challenge here. It was like an adult taking on a small child. Well, actually, that might even have been a more fair fight. It was more like a person stomping on ants.

Yuri and I had our heatguns in hand. Without aiming, or even really thinking, we blasted away indiscriminately. Overwhelmed already by Mugi's power, the remaining armored soldiers had stood there staring blankly. It was our one chance to turn the tables on this battle.

We blasted the armored soldiers. We weren't aiming, just shooting.

The warriors were caught off-guard. After getting sliced up by Mugi, suddenly they were being lit up with heat rays. Before they realized that the fire was coming from the inside of the tunnel, we used the confusion to make our escape.

Right at the perfect moment, Mugi got back onto all fours.

We leaped from the mine tunnel.

"Unh!" Yuri yelped. It was right when she lit up maybe five soldiers all at once. She never let off the trigger. But then the beams stopped flying. She was out of

power. The reserve tube was empty. This was the gun she'd borrowed from the mayor, and was a different brand than the one I was using. Her ray gun still sat in her holster, but no one knew more than Yuri that it would be little use against the armor of these warriors.

Our offensive strength was just cut in half. Poor Mugi. He'd come to us right when we became our weakest.

I couldn't take on all the remaining armored warriors with just my heatgun.

Before I knew it, Yuri had tossed out the Bloody Card. It was a playing-card-sized weapon made of Tegroid steel. Each of the four edges are incredibly sharp, and it is powered by an ion drive to cut down enemies. It can be controlled by a handheld transmitter so the target of the Bloody Card can't get away.

However, against the armored warriors, the Bloody Card wasn't terribly effective. It was about as useful as a ray gun. If it was able to get between the joints in the armor, it could take out a warrior, but in any other spot it couldn't do anything against them. It was cutting the armor, but the armor was so thick that the Bloody Card couldn't reach flesh.

Since our offensive abilities were weakened, the warriors came at us even stronger.

Getting reorganized, they launched a brutal attack toward the tunnel. Dammit, Mugi! Why couldn't you just have taken care of all these guys in the open area instead of bringing them to us?!

But complaining wasn't going to turn the balance of this battle back to us. With the laser guns blasting at us, Mugi was threatened, too. The fighting Mugi was not about to jump out the tunnel entrance. He was nailed to the floor.

In situations like this there is only one thing to do.

Escape.

Yuri steered the Bloody Card back in.

"Inside! To the back! Hurry!" I shouted. My heatgun was keeping the armored soldiers from coming further, so I couldn't look behind me, but I could sense

that Yuri and Mugi had taken off running. I shot the heatgun with my left hand while I took out a capsule with my right. It was the same type I'd used at the CDC Headquarters building.

I flicked the capsule outside the tunnel entrance.

Before it hit the ground the capsule exploded into a fireball.

At the same time I turned away. I was off and running. Before the laser started chasing me I wanted to get as far away from the entrance as possible. The tunnel got pitch black as I got away from the opening. I couldn't hardly see my hand in front of my face. To make matters worse, the floor of the tunnel was rough and uneven. There were holes in the ground, throwing me off, but somehow I kept my balance, and kept running down the tunnel.

My shoulder hit the tunnel wall. The tunnel was curving. If I kept running I was going to crash. I put out both arms and fumbled forward.

It was a hard turn. The tunnel started descending. The darkness got even thicker. It was now absolute darkness. It was so dark you could almost feel it. Apparently the light shining in from the entrance couldn't make it around the corner. I could have really used night vision goggles, but as luck would have it, I had nothing like that on me. As it was, I was continuing on pure instinct.

Just as I made that determination I stumbled onto a ledge coming out of the ceiling. It extended in front of me diagonally. It went from my forehead all the way to the wall. I had my hands out, which cushioned any damage, but it still stung. It was impossible to run any further. I had to walk from here on out. I extended my hands out to my sides, and ran my fingers along the wall as I carefully proceeded, one step at a time.

Sloosh.

I stepped on something soft.

Surprised, I quickly pulled my foot back.

"Umigya!"

Mugi cried out.

Oh, it must have been Mugi's tail. That's what it felt like under my foot. But

shouldn't Mugi be a lot farther ahead of me? What was he doing here...

"Is that you, Mugi?" I asked.

"Kei?"

From the darkness came not Mugi's voice, but a response from Yuri.

"It's so dark, I can't see a thing," I said. "Those guys are going to be right behind us if we don't do something."

No doubt the armored warriors were equipped with lights or heat detectors or something along those lines. They may even have had night vision goggles. This meant they could move a lot faster than we could at this pace. It was only a matter of time before they caught up to us.

"Why don't you hop onto Mugi's back?" suggested Yuri. "It's easier for him if he doesn't have to worry about us. That's the vibe I got. That's why we were waiting for you here."

So that's what was going on. I was more than a little moved. Well done, Yuri. Well done, Mugi. These were model partners. My heart grew warm. World-class idols.

"Hurry, jump on behind me..."

I felt Yuri's outstretched hand on my shoulder. I grabbed onto her hand. Yuri pulled me closer and I felt Mugi's body. Here was his tail. Here was his back. Hm, this must be Yuri's rear end. I straddled Mugi's spine. I wrapped my arms around Yuri's waist and interlocked my fingers.

"We're off. Keep your head as low as you can," said Yuri. Who knew what was hanging from the ceiling? The braces sticking out from the wall were also dangerous. If you were to slam into one of those you would die, for sure. I bent down as low as I could, and pressed my cheek into Yuri's back.

Mugi took off running. There was no sound from his paws and we were barely jostled around. And he was going really fast. I couldn't see, but I could tell by the air brushing past my body. Yuri's long black hair whipped around, tickling my left shoulder. On top of that, the roar of the wind was incredible. It howled in my ears.

This made me feel secure. At least that's what I thought at that moment. I had no idea how long the tunnel was or where it would lead, but at least we were putting distance between us and the attacking warriors. Then we would need to take a look at that crater, too. There must be some sort of clue there.

But.

It was too soon to act so relieved.

The armored soldiers had anticipated our moves.

5

It felt like we had been riding on Mugi's back for about twenty minutes.

The tunnel still went on. In distance we had gone maybe six kilometers. No, we had gone at least seven. But there was still no sign of an exit. In a word, Mugi was amazing. Here we were, draped in darkness going down a rough and unpredictable tunnel. But still, he carried two people on his back. I don't care if he's the strongest Mugi of his race, it must have been tiring. But still, our Mugi hadn't slowed one iota. With just his sensitive nose he cut through the darkness.

"Doesn't this feel like a maze?" I asked Yuri, pulling myself up and close to her ear. "We could be running around in circles through the same place over and over for eternity, never finding the way out, and—"

"Stop breathing on my neck," said Yuri interrupting me. What a cold response. I pulled myself down from her shoulder, frustrated. Wha-what got into her? I bit down on the base of Yuri's neck.

"Ouch!"

Yuri twisted her body. I started to tickle her.

She struggled back. She giggled and tried to bat me off.

The problem was I was bored. How long were we going to keep riding on Mugi's back? It would be one thing if I could see some gorgeous landscape or

have at least something to look at. But we were still stuck in pitch-black darkness. I couldn't even see myself, much less anything around me. Now that we had hit the thirty-minute mark, it wasn't unusual for a full-grown woman to get impatient.

So I was getting a little screwy, and I had to release some energy.

Naturally I wasn't going to mess with Mugi, the one carrying two people on his back all this way.

Even as his caretaker, there were certain lines I wouldn't cross.

I bet he thought that was true.

Mugi suddenly stopped.

He let out a low growl.

"Not good..."

I panicked.

"Kei, this is your fault!" Yuri quickly attacked. "You and your little games."

"C'mon, Yuri, you were enjoying it," I replied. I can't stand getting blamed for things that aren't my fault. She'd been playing along a second ago.

"Grrr..."

Mugi's growl grew stronger.

"Listen, this obviously isn't the time to get into it," said Yuri. Her voice was shaking. "This is the real deal."

"We better apologize," I said. "If Mugi were to dump us here, we'd be dead."

"I don't want to die!"

We agreed to apologize.

"Sorry, Mugi," we said in unison.

But, right then.

Mugi was ignoring us.

"Gurrrrr," Mugi growled again.

“Gyaaon!”

He suddenly roared. As he growled out, he jumped back about one meter.

Bright beams broke the darkness, lighting up wherever they struck, sending us to the wall.

Laser guns.

The bright lights exposed our position.

Accustomed to the darkness, the light made my head pound.

This was a big mistake. Mugi wasn't mad at us. Sensing something out of the ordinary, he'd stopped moving to warn us.

Flashlights tore through the darkness. Not prepared for the bright lights after so long in the dark really threw a curveball to my optic nerves. Ouch! But I wasn't going to let it get to me. Covering our heads with our arms we rolled off Mugi's back.

We rolled up the wall and pressed our backs against the rock. I had already pulled out my heatgun.

“Uuwan!”

The now unburdened Mugi jumped straight to the heart of the enemy.

The light beams were suddenly darkened.

It became pitch black, again. The afterimages from the lights had been burned into my eyes. The streaks from the afterimages were crossed with pulses from a laser gun. In the darkness it was easy to hide, but also just as easy to be exposed by a light beam. That was painfully clear. But now we also knew where the enemy was. Taking aim, I squeezed the trigger of my heatgun.

The blast lit up the enemy and the wall together.

The rising flame momentarily lit up the tunnel.

I could see the enemy. The red flames reflected off their armor. It was them. I also caught a vision of a gaping hole in the tunnel wall. A short cut. They had cut us off and then waited for our arrival.

Mugi had kicked over a number of soldiers. Yuri sent the Bloody Card into the

air. The number of armored warriors was surprisingly low. Not all the warriors from the open area came. Maybe ten had pursued us. Or could this be a completely different troop of soldiers?

The flame burned out.

I fired twice more, and then three more times.

Mugi maneuvered himself between the light beams and my heat rays. Yuri kept the Bloody Card flying. She was going for the arms of the armored warriors carrying the laser guns. We knew it would be hard to kill them with the Bloody Card, but if it could eliminate some of the laser guns, that would be a big help. That alone would put us on the offensive. The battle only took a few minutes.

We wiped the floors with them. They didn't stand a chance.

The fight was over before it began. We got lucky that they had too few fighters in a narrow tunnel. The odds had rolled our way.

They were unable to return our attacks, and the battle had ended with the dense boom of an explosion.

The tunnel fell silent.

After checking on each other, we prepared to advance down the tunnel again.

Yuri took a flashlight from one of the fallen soldiers. Sometimes her sticky fingers come in handy. The light was off when Yuri picked it up, so we didn't know if it actually worked, but pressing the power switch sent a bright beam of light, piercing through the darkness.

Within the ring of light we could see the fallen armored warriors, their bodies strewn about, unmoving.

There were six bodies altogether.

The other soldiers must have retreated. They had also destroyed the shortcut through the side of the wall. A giant pile of rock and sand blocked the hole up. That was the explosion we'd heard. It wasn't pretty, but it had served its purpose.

Yuri and I went to take a closer look at the fallen soldiers. They were all dead. Two by the heatgun and four by Mugi. Among those, three had lost arms to the

Bloody Card.

“Grrrr...”

Mugi came to us. He was growling strangely. Yuri pointed the light at him.

Wow!

Maybe it was from the brightness of the light, as Mugi turned his head away as the light shone his way. One of the fallen soldiers was being carried in Mugi’s mouth. (To put it correctly, he was pulling the soldier from the nape of his neck, well, the fine details don’t really matter. Basically he was hanging from his mouth.) “Ugg...”

Mugi opened his mouth. The soldier flopped to the ground. “Nh... unh... nh...,” he moaned, looking straight up.

This could only mean—

He was still alive. This armored soldier wasn’t dead.

Nice work, Mugi! You just discovered a very valuable clue!



We rushed over to the soldier.

Lifting him up, we took off his mask. It doubled as night vision goggles. The lenses bulged out like the eyes on a deep-water ocean fish. We then removed the soldier's armor. Then we were able to see his uncovered face.

Yuri shined the light onto his head.

He was older than I'd expected. Older, but not elderly. I would have guessed him to be about forty years old at the most. He had deep creases in his face. His hair was a light brown and his eyes had an amber tone. Those eyes looked up blankly. We hadn't opened his eyes, they were already open, but they barely showed signs of life.

"Who are you?" I asked the soldier.

No response. A faint moan was all that trickled from his halfopen mouth.

Huh? How irritating. I slapped him across the cheeks five times, or so. I am not sure if it was due to my shock therapy, but a glitter of light glimmered in his pupils.

Before missing my chance I repeated my question.

"Who are you? Why are you wearing this?"

"Oo... ooaa... oo-oo...," the soldier groaned painfully.

"Answer me!" I insisted.

"Ooaa, Bo-Boralura..."

"Huh?"

I was perplexed. Boralura? What the hell was that? It sounded like some kind of name.

"Ab-absolute... Absolute..."

He spat the words out fearfully. This was starting to make sense. If I was right,

after “Absolute” should be “Children of God.” That was the group that followed the master, according to Landis.

“Kei, look at this!” said Yuri. She was pointing at the back of the soldier’s neck.

“It’s an ID tag!”

She was indicating a small gold-colored pendant around the soldier’s neck. On its face was engraved the soldier’s name, blood type, as well as the number of the ore group he belonged to. It also had Chakra Development Company’s name— The soldier’s name was Petrovich. He was a miner from Mine #11.

The armored warriors were actually CDC miners!

“Let’s get this guy outside,” I said. “If he regains consciousness we can start getting some answers.”

“Mugi, can you carry three?” asked Yuri. “This guy looks pretty heavy.”

“Let’s get him out of all this armor. That should lighten him up.”

“I wonder...”

Yuri didn’t trust me. Unlike metal armor, this special armor was made from a lightweight material. Removing it would only lighten him up by a couple kilos.

“Let’s ask Mugi,” I responded. “You got that flashlight, so if worse comes to worse we can walk, or we can take turns on Mugi, if he’s up for it.”

“Yeah, okay...,” said Yuri, obviously uncertain. This was dangerous. Once she decided to make a decision, this flip-flopper took at least two days to reach it. If I were to let her, she’d stand on that spot without moving for who-knows-how-long.

Instead of waiting for Yuri’s opinion I decided to get Mugi’s read. We still didn’t know how long this tunnel was. I was fine with walking, but preferred to ride on Mugi’s back if that was an option.

“Mugi...,” I turned to him and called his name.

Hey, hey, hey!

He’d been here a second ago, but now he was gone.

“Mugi! Where did you go?!”

I grabbed the flashlight from Yuri and shined it up and down the tunnel as panicked creases formed on my forehead.

I illuminated both the way we'd come from and the way we were going.

There he was! He was just a little ways down the tunnel. He was low to the ground staring at the wall. He was baring his fangs and his black fur stood on end. I couldn't hear his voice, but looking at his position, there was no question he was growling ferociously.

A cold sweat trickled down my back.

Mugi's mood. His actions.

It was the warrior's counterattack.

That was the first thing that came to my mind.

I quickly brought the light up to illuminate the wall he was facing. If it really was the armored warriors mounting another attack there should be another hole in the tunnel wall, or something like that there.

At least I thought so, but there was nothing there. Just the plain wall. So Mugi was having a standoff with a wall. But he was still acting as if there were some terrible monster there.

Another cold shiver moved down my spine.

If it wasn't the armored warriors, then it must have been something else... something worse. It could be an unseen enemy that could pounce on us from the wall, or maybe the ceiling. There was only one creature I knew that fit that description.

"Gyaon!"

Mugi jumped. Getting a good push off the ground, he got up high.

I was right.

"Yuri! The fangs!"

I laid Petrovich down and stood up. Without thinking Yuri also jumped up.

I then turned off the flashlight.

My body was slammed from behind.

I rolled down the now completely dark tunnel. Stopping at the wall I pulled out my heatgun and held it to my chest.

Not the wind, but something blew through the tunnel. The pressure pressed my body back. It was hungry for blood, the evil body of this invisible beast.

“Gyawao,” Mugi cried. He bayed and chased after the fangs.

What could the fanged creature be trying to accomplish? Was it getting us? Or was it...

“Hyee!”

There was a scream. From the back of the darkness. It came from where I was a few moments ago. That voice. It wasn't Yuri?

It was the death cry of a man.

So that was the target.

With no hesitation, I turned on the flashlight. I quickly scanned the area looking for Petrovich. He was there. Yuri was with him. I didn't see Mugi anywhere. He had chased the invisible fangs into the darkness.

“Kei!” Yuri called me. Keeping the heatgun ready, I ran over to Yuri.

“It got him.”

Yuri was propping up Petrovich's torso.

Petrovich's body was covered in blood. There was a giant bite taken out from his side. His head, neck, chest, and abdomen. Scooped out of his armor. This was an adult-sized monster, as there were only the marks of two giant teeth. Yet his body had been ravaged. The reason he wasn't cut completely in half must have been because Mugi'd started to chase the fanged monster.

“Mgyau... fu... fo... fu...”

Mugi had returned, breathing heavily through his nose. It appeared it had gotten away again. Along with Mugi, Yuri and I stood up from Petrovich's body, dispirited. Right when we had a strong witness literally in our hands, in the blink of an eye he was gone. It hit us pretty hard.

“I guess we just leave him here,” said Yuri. She was talking about Petrovich’s remains. I hadn’t thought about it until that point, but she was right. We wouldn’t have anything to gain from trying to bring his body out.

“Shall we get going?” I said to Mugi, after pausing a few moments to calm my nerves. Mugi got down on his knees, making it easier for us to get up on his back.

Yuri straddled Mugi’s back first. Then I was about to jump on.

It was right at that moment.

It came with a whoosh.

For a second I thought I was dizzy. I was exhausted from lack of sleep. That’s what it felt like, at least.

But that wasn’t the problem.

It came again with a rumble.

It was a violent vertical shake.

I realized then that it wasn’t vertigo. It was an earthquake. This wasn’t what happens when you are dizzy.

I reached out to Mugi to use his body as support.

But I made a mistake.

My outstretched hand touched nothing but air. I had misjudged the distance.

I lost my balance and fell forward.

Aah! Maybe I really was dizzy...

7

No matter how hard I tried to, I couldn’t keep myself up. Not only had I lost my balance from leaning forward, but my legs were thrown by the tremors. I had no way to stop myself from losing my footing.

I casually floated through the air. It was a perfect head over heels tumble.

I crashed to the ground.

That had to be the same spot where Yuri'd slipped off Mugi too. Perfect timing.

Unh!

Her big butt landed right on my slim belly.

"That was an aftershock!" shouted Yuri, still on top of me. Who cares?! First things first! Before you start yelling stuff, get the hell off of me!

We could hear the sound of rocks cracking and the mountain breaking up. This was a huge earthquake. The tunnel floor was moving up and down like pistons in an engine.

Rocks and sand rained down like a waterfall.

That's when I finally realized it.

We were in a tunnel. The mountain the tunnel was cut into was collapsing. Dirt and rocks falling in the tunnel meant...

We were going to be buried alive.

A rock fell from the roof of the cave and struck me in the wrist, knocking the flashlight from my hand.

The moment it left my fingers, the flashlight went dark. It was crushed under falling rocks.

Back to darkness. But now we had nowhere to escape to. Inside the rock tunnel, the very idea of finding a place to avoid the falling rocks was absurd.

I gave up. Let fate play this hand. If it was us versus the mountain then there was nothing we could do to change the odds. Take us now.

At this moment of extreme desperation, something soft spread over Yuri and me. I tried to feel what it was with my hands.

Big, soft, warm.

Of course! It's Mugi! Mugi had covered us with his body to protect us from

the falling rocks and debris.

But if the entire tunnel collapsed, it wouldn't be much use.

The extreme pessimist in me had a hard time seeing an upside to this turn of events.

At least half a minute had gone by and the earthquake continued.

The sound of falling rocks and stone being crushed resonated through the darkness. I was completely resigned to the fact that this tunnel was going to collapse eventually. Yuri lost it. Lying on the floor she was doing some sort of horizontal ballroom dance by herself.

While she writhed gracefully, the earthquake gradually settled down.

Mugi got up, off of us.

"Mgya."

With my eyes firmly shut tight, I held Mugi's head with both hands. He was trying to tell us to get up. An aftershock might come or maybe we were in the quiet calm before the big storm, so to speak.

I slowly lifted my head up.

Please... please don't let a big rock fall on me now.

I mumbled to myself as I slowly opened my eyes.

Light. I blinked my eyes repeatedly. I wasn't able to open them all the way.

Squinting, I examined our surroundings. Yuri was to my side. Yuri was sitting up and staring dumbfounded behind me.

Huh?

Light? I can see Yuri?

It's actually bright out!

I tried to get Yuri's attention.

Her eyes were two dots. Her mouth was forming words, but no sound came out.

An opening. A giant hole. In the tunnel wall.

It must have opened up during the earthquake. That final rumble that I thought would be the end of our lives in this world was the opening of this gaping hole. What do you know? It was less than ten meters from where we were huddled under Mugi. Just a tiny bit closer and the closing credits would have been rolling up the screen. For sure. A cold sweat suddenly covered my body.

“Grrrr,”

Mugi let out a low growl as he quietly walked toward the edge of the hole. The hole was about five meters wide. Almost as wide as the tunnel itself. Bright light came streaming in through the hole obliterating the darkness of the tunnel. Looking that way at Mugi hurt my eyes to the point that tears were starting to form. But not turning away, I felt that something was strange about this light. It was frightfully white. It didn’t feel like it was flowing in naturally but was inserted into the darkness.

“Nyagau,” Mugi moaned as he turned his head. It seemed that he wanted us to follow him.

Yuri and I looked at each other.

“I think Mugi has something to show us,” I said.

“I think I’ve already seen it all,” Yuri replied strongly.

We stood up together and walked over to the front of the hole.

Standing near the edge, we poked our necks through the hole to see what was on the other side.

“Ah!”

“Aah!”

Nothing could have prepared us for what we saw. Nuts! I should have bet Yuri when she said she had seen it all. She certainly couldn’t have expected this!

What we saw through the other side the whole was...

A giant black egg.

It was the same black egg we’d seen in our clairvoyant vision!

I couldn't tell how far we were from the black egg. I guessed within one kilometer. The cliffs and rough terrain continued from here all the way to the black egg, and the rock formations actually appeared to form a sort of monument, a pillar holding up the egg. The sky was covered in a thick grayish fog, and no blue poked through that I could see. Naturally, I couldn't see the sun, either. In one part the fog covered the surface of the ground, and as the colors were so close it was hard to tell where the rocks ended and the fog began. It was a cold monotone vision.

The scene looked like an India ink drawing.

The egg was huge. Truly gigantic. With nothing to compare it to, it was hard to be more accurate than that. I would put the height at over 300 meters, easily. If this was really the living egg of some unknown creature, I surely didn't want to meet whatever had laid it.

"Kei..."

The silent Yuri spoke. Her speech sounded forced, yet was barely a whisper.

"If that is the same egg we saw, then... then we are seeing the... seeing the key to the case now."

"I think seeing it is all that we should be doing, if that."

"Yeah, but," she said, gaining her voice, "it isn't like it's going to just sit here like this forever." She took her ray gun from her holster. "The hole in the wall those soldiers who were waiting for us made is right over there."

"And also the place where the invisible jaws arrived."

I readied the heatgun.

"Grrrr..."

Mugi got low to the ground and his feelers whipped through the air.

It was anticipation for battle.

We had no choice but to move forward.

To see where the hole was on the side of the mountain, I would need to lean through the hole to check.

Yuri held onto me as I timidly stuck my head through the hole. What the—?

I breathed a sigh of relief.

It wasn't nearly as bad as I had imagined. It was only four or five meters. After we could get down, a ridge continued unbroken to the pedestal the egg stood on. Thankfully the ridge wasn't narrow like a sword's blade, so it wouldn't be a balancing act getting there. The only problem was whether or not we had the energy to get there. What was I saying? If it was too far, we always had Mugi.

I gave Yuri the sign and she pulled me back in, and then we went back into the tunnel. I told Yuri what I'd seen.

"We can go the whole way on that ridge."

Yuri nodded her head.

"The only thing I am worried about is that fog," I said. "If we can't see through it when we are on the ridge, then it will be difficult to move. No matter how wide it gets, a ridge is still a ridge. If we aren't careful we could fall down to the bottom of the ravine."

"Waa! That sounds painful!" Yuri exclaimed, bringing her hands to her mouth, giving a frightful look. Hmph. Silly Yuri. Of course it would hurt!

"Let's get moving," I said, ignoring Yuri's mock fear. "And don't tumble off the low cliff."

Turning on my heel, I stood at the edge of the hole. I bent over to get ready to jump down from the hole.

It was as if they were waiting for me to do this.

A head popped up.

The ashen-colored helmet of the armored soldiers.

Not just one or two. Lined up at the edge of the hole were seven armored warriors. From the cliff below the hole they suddenly were right in front of me.

Like a line of Jack-in-the-boxes.

I was truly taken off-guard.

“Hoyaa!” I cried, jumping back. It’s a miracle I wasn’t scared stiff.

The warriors surged. Brandishing their laser guns, they swooped up in through the hole.

“Grrr!”

From out of nowhere, Mugi was suddenly standing in front of us. He bared his fangs and glared at the soldiers with a fiery rage. I pulled out my heatgun. Yuri holstered her ray gun and innocently held the Bloody Card between her fingers. Our position wasn’t so bad. They had a cliff to their backs, and a single digit number of men.

And then at that moment.

“This is where it ends. Gods of Destruction...”

A voice rang out from behind us.

We spun around.

Shadows seeped forward out of the darkness.

There were at least ten of them. No. Double that number.

A leader stepped forward. They were all armored warriors.

But the apparent leader wasn’t wearing armor. Instead he was draped in a loose white robe. On his face he wore an eerie silver mask. It was smooth with no facial features.

Master.

The armored soldiers moved quickly, surrounding us.

The master slowly came closer to us. But it didn’t seem like he was walking. It was more like he was sliding across the surface of the ground. At least that’s what it seemed like. I wanted to see what was under that robe. I wondered what his legs looked like. But his body was completely covered by the robe, and I got no hint as to what was underneath.

“So the leading actor finally makes his entrance,” I said, facing the master. “The master of the invisible fangs, who created an armored army of miners,

who turned a mountain of ore into a crater, and who killed the sheriff and the owner. Wait. That's not all. You are also the one who found out we were coming and sent assassins to Lyonesse, am I wrong?"

"..."

"Tell me. What is your aim? Is it money? Power? Or is it all for Buddha?"

"..."

No response.

"C'mon, speak up!"

I readied the heatgun to the master's chest and took a quick step forward. Naturally, this was a bluff. Surrounded by all these soldiers, there was no means of escape. That's why I acted like we had the upper hand.

"The opposite sex is nice, Gods of Destruction," the master said quietly. Since he had no mouth I wasn't totally sure that the voice came from the master, but my gut told me that he was the one speaking. It was the same voice that had called out a few moments earlier.

"But your female forms are not going to be enough to allow you to move," he continued. "The deception is over. We are going to sacrifice you to Boralura. Consider it an honor."

Boralura! That's the name that Petrovich had mumbled before the fangs tore him up.

"Can you not change the subject?" Yuri said. She held up a Bloody Card in each hand at shoulder-level, ready to send them flying at a moment's notice.

"You should see that your life is in our grasp. Between Kei's heatgun and my Bloody Cards, we are going to be the ones killing you!"

Wow, Yuri. Those are some pretty severe words coming from such a cute face.

"Hm. That's funny," the master said calmly. "You should test your theory. You'll find those cards won't do you any good."

"You asked for it!"

Yuri's cheeks were flushed.

Taking a step forward Yuri released the two Bloody Cards which went sailing straight toward the master.

The master's robe expanded out to the left and right. Apparently he had spread his arms out.

The cards flew in an arc, and came down at the master from above at two steep angles.

The master didn't even try to escape. Buzzing through the air, the deadly cards closed in on their target, but like a white shadow, the master stood frozen. I felt not an ounce of sympathy for him.

Despite the pending imminent danger, neither the leader nor his soldiers moved a muscle.

The Bloody Cards tore through the white robe, and then through the master's flesh.

Or right when I thought that was the case...

The master lit up brightly.

9

To put it correctly, what lit up was the master's mask and robe. It only lasted for a moment, but it was so bright, so very bright that I couldn't tell what was what.

It was an incredible flash. It was pure white, and felt like it had strength, a power of its own.

Robe of light. Mask of light. But all I could see at this point was white light dancing spastically. My vision was of only white, white, white.

It might be best to explain it as an explosion, and all of the fragments and rubble were glowing shards of light.

It wasn't like a continued shine, but like whatever was hit with the light then lit up too, and it spread outward that way.

All I saw was darkness and goose bumps rose on my skin. I couldn't move. I was under the light's spell. I couldn't say my muscles were in pain. But I still couldn't see. My eyes were tightly shut, and my left hand covered them, but that didn't stop the light from beaming all around. We were at the mercy of this angry light that was determined to torment us.

A scream tore through my ears. It might have been from Yuri, but on the other hand, it could have been my scream. I couldn't even tell that much.

This was the limit. The end.

Sa-sanity slipping.

Soul—My soul being torn away.

Like that, the light went out.

Huh?

That was anti-climactic.

It was all over too quick.

It was like we had entered the eye of a hurricane.

With my eyes firmly shut I couldn't see what was going on, but my body could sense that the light storm had subsided. It was because I could feel the push, the pressure from the light subside. That was how tremendously powerful this light was.

I put down my arms and slowly opened my eyes.

My muscles had stiffened and my joints creaked.

The master stood in the same place and in the same position. His robe was not shredded and his body had sustained no injuries or damage.

The Bloody Cards were nowhere to be seen. The fact that the master was uninjured meant that the Bloody Cards had never reached him.

I scanned up and down the tunnel. I was looking to see if the flying cards didn't fly down the tunnel or fall to the floor.

My eyes fell upon my right hand, and couldn't be torn away.

The hand that held the heatgun pointed at the master.

The heatgun had been sliced in half.

Everything past the trigger guard was gone. The grip was untouched, but the barrel was... gone. Did it melt? When the light was whipping around?

The white light. Material exposed to the white light melted and evaporated.

The thought was sobering.

The crater. That is the same as the crater. A giant circular white light had melted the rocky mountain, making it into a tanned mirror-surfaced crater. The master had just shown us the tip of the iceberg of his power.

I tossed the now-useless heatgun aside. Since we'd lost the Bloody Cards the only real weapon we had between us was the ray gun in Yuri's holster.

"Grrrr..."

Mugi took a step forward.

His leaned into a hunting posture and gave a low growl.

"So there you are," said the master in a quiet demeaning tone.

A tone that Mugi could read.

"Gaao!"

Anger. He exposed his fangs and his whole body vibrated with tension. The muscles in his shoulders rose up like two small mountains.

His legs lowered, building up energy.

He kicked off the ground, bounding into the air at the master.

The master's right hand moved.

An electric bolt shot out in every direction.

It branched and spread. Mugi's body was hit by a spark.

The electric bolt connected. "Gyaan!" Mugi cried.

I couldn't believe it. I had never heard such a miserable cry.

Enveloped in the lightning, he fell to the ground.

Snap! The lightning hissed and crackled.

Mugi writhed within the electric net, but the net didn't break or disappear.

"There's no way out," the master muttered and laughed. "This net was specially made for catching Mugi. Any attempt to use the Mugi's power to manipulate electricity or electromagnetic energy only makes it stronger."

Wha-wha—? This guy knew all that about Mugi. And then he took that knowledge to make a weapon to counter a Mugi attack.

"You may be Gods of Destruction, but against me you are powerless." The master lifted his head up slightly.

The ring of soldiers around us closed in.

"Don't come any closer!"

Yuri lifted the ray gun.

"Stupid girl!" the master spat out.

The armored soldiers lifted their arms out to us in unison.

I heard a whooshing sound.

A sweet smell filled my nose.

Then it hit me.

Gas. That's what I thought.

That's when it started working.

The world started spinning. And spinning. Faster.

I lost consciousness.

...

Opening my eyes was surprisingly easy.

I wasn't nauseous and my head wasn't pounding.

I actually woke up feeling well rested and pretty dam good. I admired the high quality of that knock-out gas. I hadn't lost any of my memory, either. It was my

first good sleep in a long time. Good stuff!

After opening my eyes, I naturally wanted to stretch my body.

I couldn't. My arms and legs wouldn't move.

Looking around, I was able to get a picture of the situation. I was bound up to a light metal alloy cross-shaped pillar with electromagnetic manacles. It was different from a typical cross on the lower half of the vertical pillar. The bottom half was split in two. So my legs were spread about forty degrees and individually bound.

Hmph, a rather tasteless way to bind up a lady. My face turned red with embarrassment.

To my right was Yuri. She was awake, and looking around, too.

Beyond Yuri was a black wall. But it wasn't a wall. It was our giant egg standing there.

It was so big that it looked like a wall. Apparently the Absolute Children of God carried us from the tunnel to here.

Right in front of the black egg, there appeared to be a structure made of stone. The naked pillars revealed a majestic design, and reminded me of something I might have seen as an art student studying ancient religious ruins. Maybe these were the real deal. Though I doubted they were actually ancient.

This was a sacred place for the egg, or it was here first and the egg ate up whatever was the focus of worship. At least that's what it looked like. We were about 50 meters from the entrance of the temple (if that's really what it was), and whether our position on the crosses in relation to the egg and the temple had any significance wasn't obvious yet.

In front of the temple was a wide stone plaza. Where the crosses stood would have been on the left-hand edge of the stone plaza if you were looking from the temple. Beyond the stone plaza was dirt. The ground beyond the plaza was forty or fifty centimeters lower than the plaza stones.

On the ground there stood the Absolute Children of God lined up.

To our side there were about fifty lines of people, probably in about ten rows.

Which would make approximately five hundred followers. The owner hadn't been kidding about how many believers the master had.

Could it be that almost all the miners were believers? Or else there was a sudden influx of members, maybe?

All the believers wore blue robes similar to the style of the master's. Only the final line of fifty was made up of armed, armored warriors.

All the followers had their heads bowed to the ground and were repeating some kind of chant in unison in a low voice... Ohohh... Ohohh. I couldn't quite tell what they were saying but it might have "Boralura."

"Kei...", Yuri called out to me. "Look at the sky."

"Hn?"

I turned my gaze upward.

The sky was completely filled with the gray fog. It was the same fog we'd seen from the tunnel earlier.

"There never seems to be a break in the mist," said Yuri. "That's why this place was never discovered by the mayor's precious satellite."

"That's probably the case," I said nodding in agreement. I mean, look at the size of that egg. Even without a spy satellite, it should have been discovered before now. A light plane could have found it. The fact that no one had even heard or talked about it before told me that this fog above was placed there to hide it. So, in the end, the fog was manmade. Otherwise they wouldn't have been able to continue like this.

"Ah!"

Yuri, who was facing me, made a tiny shriek.

"The believers are looking up, now."

"Huh?"

I turned to look.

It was just like Yuri had said. The followers, who had all been looking at their feet were now all gazing at the temple with their hands pressed together in

prayer.

I got it.

They were expecting someone to appear from the temple, I guessed.

I quickly turned my head back and forth. This was calisthenics. Nothing else.

My guess was right on the money.

From the back of the temple the form of a person appeared. Since we were high up, we could look down and see pretty clearly.

There wasn't just one silhouette. There were two. They stood shoulder to shoulder. I guessed one was the master, but who could the second person be? Don't tell me there are more string-pullers behind all this.

The forms came through the gateway.

"Uwaa!"

I was blown away.

One of the forms was, indeed, the master. Just as before, he was draped in a white robe and moved as if he was sliding rather than walking.

And then there was the other person. This was the real problem.

He was standing next to the master.

He was tall. He had broad shoulders. He had long legs. He wore a blue checkered shirt. He wore faded blue jeans. He had almost transparent blond hair. And, finally, he had a very handsome face.

It was... It was Jeff.

Jeff!

The handsome sheriff.

He was alive!

**if there's one thing I hate,
it's alternative dimensions!**

Jeff and the master made their way to the center of the plaza.

"Jeff!" I called out to him.

His jumped and looked my way.

His legs stood frozen. His eyes opened up wide.

Our eyes met. Those bright blue eyes. They were beautiful enough to elicit a deep sigh. And what those sparkling beauties were gazing at was, of course, me. Me and me only.

And then Jeff called out.

"Yuri!"

Wha—

Shock. Off the scale. It was like my head had been broken open with a hammer. All the energy in my body poured out my toes. I had lost all willpower, too. Consciousness was fading.

"Kei!"

He then quickly called my name. But it was too late. I had already died. Stupid jerkhead. It's not that easy to revive the dead.

Jeff glanced to his left at the master. Then, as if he had made a difficult decision, he set off running in our direction.

The master's robe stretched out toward Jeff.

"Jeff! No!"

Seeing the scene play out, I was completely resuscitated. I needed to know what the master was up to. Jeff didn't need another death to add to his problems.

A finger extended from the master's robe.

Aimed at the running Jeff's back, the fingertip glowed brightly.

Electricity shot from his finger. It was different than the electric net that trapped Mugi. It was more like the pulse of a laser gun. Intermittent bursts reached Jeff.

"Gya!"

Jeff bent backward as the light blue bolts struck his spine.

The muscles in his back forcing him to stand on tiptoe, both his arms shot forward. His fingers wiggled, trying to grab something that wasn't there. His arms went into convulsions.

"Jeff!"

I twisted in my bound position atop the cross. Really, this couldn't be more annoying. I wanted to break these bonds and run to Jeff. Dammit. Dammit. Why did he have to be so hot?

Jeff's body went stiff. The convulsions had stopped. He wasn't moving at all. He stood there as if he was frozen. Because of the obvious pain, his gallant expression faded, yet his arms reached out longingly in my direction. His stance reminded me of a statue of a warrior from an ancient age.

The master lowered his hand and the robe returned to normal.

He passed in front of the frozen sheriff. There was nothing Jeff could do. He still appeared to be conscious, as his lips were trembling. His eyes were also blinking.

The master came to the edge of the plaza. Directly across from us. He stood about twenty meters away. He had completely ignored us. As loud as I had been yelling, he hadn't even glanced in our direction. Standing in front of his five hundred followers, he raised his arms out. Again, the robe grew and spread out wide.

“My children...,” said the master in a clear and booming voice. “The opportunity has come. The sacred battle against the heathen from a faraway land has begun. The leaders of the foreigners don’t believe as we believe, and they sent Gods of Destruction to our sacred land. But we have dropped the iron hammer of justice on them. The symbol of the intolerable foreign heathen, the mines of Gautama, have vanished for eternity. Unfortunately, the leader of the heathen slipped out of our grasp, and the Gods of Destruction smashed our iron hammer.”

“Hmm,” I nodded to myself. Now the pieces were starting to fit together. The accident at Mine #4 had been the bait. It had been a lure to bring in the owner and the mayor, along with the two of us, and then nab us all in one fell swoop. But the mayor had escaped, and we’d been late in getting there. That’s when the armored warriors were called in.

“But look! The Gods of Destruction are sitting in our hands.” The master’s speech wasn’t over.

“Furthermore, the most powerful of those demons we have bound up here.”

The master turned and pointed in our direction. The gaze of the followers followed his finger. There must be something behind us that we hadn’t seen. I turned my head around as far as I could to see what he was talking about.

There was something there.

Something black and round and surrounded in some kind of lightning net.

This.

Isn’t this Mugi?

He must have been tossed there so that we wouldn’t be able to see him. He was still trapped in the electric net, slumped over on the ground. Poor Mugi! Trapped by his own energy, it was too hard to watch.

What’s that? I looked closely.

Out past where Mugi was. A dreary rocky mountain range surrounded the flat plateau where we were.

In one of the hills was a hole.

The entrance to the tunnel.

A plate was affixed above the entry way. The number 16 was engraved into the plate.

Mine #16.

So this was one part of a mine. Okay, so the master met Boralura in a mine, and then received his weird powers, and built the temple. Showing off his powers to the miners created a growing population of believers. The dead old man, Galbaldy, must have been getting ready to double-cross or betray the master.

The true tragedy was the owner. All this was happening on his own mining grounds, and he had no idea what was going on. And these followers truly believed in what the master was saying.

“The fate of the pagans has been decided. They will be crushed under our feet. They will cry out of shame for their sins.” The master’s voice grew noticeably higher.

“When we offer up the sacrifice of these Gods of Destruction, then Absolute God Boralura shall descend to this world and become one with his Absolute Children. Then all of space will be ours. Mankind is on the path to destruction. We have grasped the future. Now we shall be the leaders of all of space!”

The believers gave a collective cheer. Here and there the Children of God spoke out Boralura’s name.

“The blood of the Gods of Destruction for the Yaksha!”

The master yelled as he looked up to the sky.

“The flesh given to the cursed beasts!”

“Yuri...”

I looked over at my partner on the other cross. The two crosses were lined up close to each other. So close, in fact, that the edges of the two crossbeams were almost touching.

“Kei...”

Yuri looked back at me. I could tell by her eyes that Yuri had come to the same conclusion that I had.

This was not a good situation to be in.

We had no weapons. Mugi was out of commission. We were strung up on crosses, and our last ray of hope, the sheriff, was frozen stiff. I couldn't see any way out of this.

"It was a rough life, huh?"

I stretched out the fingers of my right hand as far as I could. It would be my version of a goodbye handshake. Even if it was only the tip of one finger, I wanted to touch Yuri's hand. The shackles had my wrists clamped down pretty tight, but I thought I might be able to reach her.

"It's times like this I wished I had taken my diet more seriously." As Yuri spoke these bizarre words she also stretched her pointer finger as far as she could.

And then at the same time our bodies shook as if suddenly hit by an electric shock.

The energy pushed through my body with a powerful force. Right when I thought this was it, there was an explosion. Without thinking, I shut my eyes. The bright flash exploded into the back of my brain. That. This was that.

Clairvoyance.

It often happened at times like this. Why always at the most inconvenient moments?!

Everything went white. The floating sensation had come. A feeling of ecstasy flowed through my body. Every cell in my body grew warm.

White. Everything was white.

To the white world.

An ashen-colored stone.

A strange shape. A person, an animal.

This was not a rock. Not a rock, but metal. I've seen this before.

Angel of Chakra.

That's it. It's the Angel of Chakra. At the mayor's mountain retreat was where he showed it to us.

Another vision appeared. Ugly. A creature. A living creature. A beast so ugly it almost made me nauseous. It was big and round and its skin was a slimy pink. It was covered in splotchy black specks. They formed a pattern. It was a dirty and unattractive pattern.

The ugly beast opened its mouth.

Half of the creature's body was mouth.

It got even uglier.

It came closer.

This giant creature with a huge gaping mouth came closer to us. In front of us was the Angel of Chakra, but the creature didn't look at all concerned.

It slammed into the Angel of Chakra.

There was an explosion.

The white world turned red with flames.

The flames quickly got darker.

Then they turned completely black.

The black flame spread.

Consciousness...

The darkness engulfed us.

2

I was back in my body.

"...my own children. Continue keeping Boralura in your minds. The Absolute God is your father. The Absolute God is the king of the new world..."

The speech was still going. As his robe whipped in the wind, the master

fervently delivered his words.

Yuri and I both sighed and looked at each other. My body felt listless. My brain felt like it had shut down.

“We are done for,” said Yuri softly. “It’s never been like this before. We can’t even tell what our visions mean.”

She was right. We had experienced a lot of firsts. The enormous power we’d run into two times was a first. Also, going into a trance just from the tips of our fingers touching was a first. I mean, if we could be sent into and out of trances so easily, we would never be able to return to a normal life. Oh yeah, and we had never seen a vision so clearly before. Usually it would have finished about the time we saw the Angel of Chakra. No, even that was more concrete than what we usually see. But, well... that’s fine, though. The real issue was that even though the vision was really clear, we still didn’t know what it meant. This alone was exhausting.

My head felt like it was full of nothing but air. My vision grew hazy. My ears were ringing.

Of all these, the ringing was the worst. It sounded like a metallic “Kee—” but really loud. And it wasn’t letting up. Even worse, just when I thought it might be fading away, the volume actually went up.

I shook my head as hard as I could. Yuri seemed to be in the same condition as her long black hair was all disheveled as she rotated her head around her neck over and over. I glanced and noticed that the Children of God were also suffering from the same problem. Some were grabbing their ears, and others were shaking their heads. What the hell was going on? Huh? Was it not my ears ringing? Could it be a real metallic noise we all heard?

The master was gazing up to the sky. He appeared to be in a state of confusion. His eyes darted around.

I looked up at the sky, too. I couldn’t move my head back very far, so I couldn’t see the entire sky.

The sky was still filled with same gray-white fog. It had lowered in the sky, and the wind was whipping it around in a giant circle.

The metallic sound got more and more intense.

But I couldn't see anything. All I could see was the fog. It was the same for the master, as his gaze jumped back and forth searching over the sky.

The sound grew into an explosive roar. Thinking about it, it reminded me a little of a Shooter, the highly maneuverable one-person flyer. Only louder. No way... There's no way.

"Ah!"

Without thinking a yelp had escaped my lips.

The fog broke.

Right above us.

At first I thought the clouds were making black shadows, but it turned out to be a silver ship, and it was flying at a ferocious speed.

A highly maneuverable flyer. It wasn't a Shooter, but there was no mistaking. It had smallish wings and a flat fuselage. It was moving too fast for me to see its exact type or any markings.

One by one more fighters appeared. The fog was pockmarked with holes. On top of that three saucer-shaped ships fell through the clouds. Could these be command ships, or maybe some kind of transport? They were much bigger and moved slower than the fighters, and flew in a spiral pattern as they dropped altitude.

All of the flyers flew outside my range of vision. The sonic boom rattled my eardrums. I heard the roar continue from my rear right to my rear left. I could hear them banking.

Eight fighters flew over my head.

They then quickly turned around to come back. They were at a lower altitude than before.

They pounded the ground with laser cannon fire.

Not where the believers were assembled, but in an area of the plaza where no person stood exploded in fire.

This was a warning shot.

The shockwave thundered through the ground.

A blast of air hit us diagonally from above.

I wouldn't call it painful.

More like almost deadly.

This repeated a total of eight times.

It was getting hard to breathe.

Next the saucers came lower. Above the plaza two of the saucers had round openings in their centers open up.

Then olive-drab painted tanks descended from the saucers. They had giant beam cannons attached to them. But after getting a better look, I could see these weren't tanks. I realized that after they fired their repulsor rockets to slow their decent. Along with the cannon, they had what looked like arms and legs. In what would be their hands each carried a larger version of a hand blaster.

Their purpose became clear.

These were mobile infantry. Not any mobile infantry, but the unrivalled high-speed mecha-powered suit variety of mobile infantry.



But.

This couldn't be true. I couldn't believe what I saw. What were these infantrymen doing on the remote mining planet of Chakra? If the GNP of a planet-state is low, they can't support a standing army. In those cases they are dependent on the United Space Force. From the two saucers four mobile infantrymen descended, two per ship with open doors. Don't disparage the fact there were only four of them. Four of these were the same as the strength of tens of thousands of normal military troops.

"Rakshasa!" screamed the master, turning from the sky to face his followers. "Go! Take care of those pagans!"

With a collective whoosh the fifty armored warriors to the rear of the believers stood up. Ooh! The armored warriors are called Rakshasa. If they were the same as the "shadows" that attacked Danp Yu then the mecha-power suits should have pretty even odds, even if it was fifty versus four.

The armored warriors dispersed. They broke into groups of about ten, and split into five different directions. They had obviously practiced this before. These miners must have a lot of free time. The unarmed believers made a run for the Mine # 16 tunnel. It was pretty far, but inside was safer than outside here once the battle started.

"Take care of these lawless maggots that anger our god," the master yelled angrily. "Realize the incredible power of Boralura!" cursed the master as he glared at the saucers in the sky.

One of the fighters set his sights on the master, and dove down at a very high speed.

The master noticed the flyer.

Eventually he poked a finger out from under his robe.

The fighter was right in front of him. From what I could see he had taken him.

The master pointed his finger at the fighter.

From the laser cannon blasted a bright beam.

The tip of the master's finger grew bright.

The match-up lasted less than a second.

The flyer went up in flames. The master stood there, calmly. The beam from the cannon which could tear a spaceship to pieces in seconds never reached him.

The flyer was blown back about three hundred meters into the sky as it exploded into a ball of flame.

This was no fight.

The master was too powerful.

However, in the meantime one of the mobile infantrymen had snuck up behind the master.

The hunched over mecha-infantry had quickly moved into the plaza at the moment the fighter and the master clashed.

The fact that I noticed it at all was complete luck.

The explosion had spread debris in all directions. Worried that he might get hit by a piece, I had looked over in Jeff's direction.

That's when I saw the mobile infantryman right next to him. His beam cannon was lined up with the master. His hand blaster was also extended and ready. The master, who had plucked the fighter out of the sky as if he had been shooting fish in a barrel, had left the defense of the temple to the armored guard, and they hadn't noticed the mobile infantry penetration (at least that's how it looked from here).

The mobile mecha-infantryman's finger squeezed down on the large scale blaster trigger.

The master spun around.

Just as the hand blaster fired.

The master lit up.

This time it wasn't just his finger. It was his whole body. It was the same as we'd seen in the tunnel. His robe and mask began to shine.

The mobile infantry was blown back. Thrown to the sky, the mecha-armor

was broken into a thousand pieces through the white light. The hand blaster and laser beam barrel rolled away from their target. The pulverized armor glowed a crimson red as it melted, and with no mercy or forgiveness the operator's body burned in the sky. The bright blast hit Jeff.

The frozen-stiff Jeff was thrown back from the energy blast of the bright light.

Suddenly he was wrapped up in this conflict. He couldn't move on his own, so he couldn't get away. He was still paralyzed.

He was slammed onto the stone plaza.

"Jeff!"

My heart was almost beating out of my chest.

"Worthless insect!" shouted the master.

His robes fluttered as he glided across the stone plaza.

He was headed straight for the entrance of the temple.

"I will crush you under my heel!" he spat out with fury and glided off.

3

"Jeff!"

My concern wasn't the master.

I was just worried about the handsome sheriff's condition.

"JEEEEEFF!"

I screamed as loud as I could to the fallen Jeff laid out on the stone plaza floor.

If something were to happen to him, I would be completely crushed (I am too embarrassed to say I would surely follow him to heaven, so I won't).

Did my impassioned cries reach their target? After screaming again and again Jeff finally responded.

First his arm moved.

Then his head. Slowly, so slowly it was starting to irk me, he raised his head up.

“!”

I swallowed my breath. His face was smeared with blood. It appeared either his temple or forehead was cut. A stream of blood flowed down his face between his eyebrows and split around his nose and dripped down off his chin. I could only barely see his eyes, but it was clear he was conscious.

He brought his hands together and pulled them, checking his strength.

He then used his arms to push himself up to a sitting position. He then slid his knees between his torso and the stone plaza. Pushing off the ground with his legs, Jeff stood up straight.

He staggered back and forth a bit. However, he was able to stay up. Spreading his arms out wide he regained his balance. It seemed he had completely broken the master's spell.

He shook his head lightly, and then put pressure on his cut with his right hand. He was bleeding badly. Jeff tore the hem of his shirt off and wrapped it around his head.

He looked around at his surroundings. Since the master had disappeared, this area had grown relatively quiet. The battle had moved to where the Children of Heaven had assembled at the tunnel.

“Jeff!”

Until then he hadn't noticed me stuck up here, and when he finally did see me, I couldn't help but call his name again. Jeff answered by raising one hand in the air. He then picked up the hand blaster from the fallen mobile infantry, and riding atop his unstable legs he slowly made his way to where we were.

One step, then another step, he made his way.

At first, each step was like a major accomplishment, but he got better as he came closer. He had recovered well. Maybe any leftover rigor had finally melted away. By the end he jogged up to the crosses.

“Turn away,” said Jeff. He had found the control panel for the crosses and was aiming the barrel of the hand blaster at it.

He pushed the trigger button.

A fireball lit up the control panel, completely destroying it.

The crosses leaned back to the ground from the base and all the electromagnetic cuffs sprung open with a click.

Jeff pulled us upright.

“You all right?” I asked Jeff, my head overflowing with emotion.

“I’m sorry,” Yuri cut in. She reached for his hand and took the hand blaster. She then went to Mugi’s side. Wha! Could someone really be that cold? Here I was trying to set the mood and everything. I understood wanting to help Mugi out, but there was a time and a place for everything!

“How did you two get here?” Jeff turned and asked me as I sent a resentful sneer to Yuri.

I quickly switched to a bright and cheery look.

I summarized the sequence of events up to this moment.

“When I saw that crater, everything went black,” I said, my voice shaking. “I thought you had been swallowed up in that white light. What an escape!”

“I didn’t exactly escape. Before that I had already been captured,” said Jeff, shaking his head. “Hearing about the accident, we headed to Mine #4 by helicopter, where the master was waiting for us. There I was called a heretic, and was gassed. I don’t remember anything after that, so I didn’t know anything about a white light or a crater. Right after they got me, I saw the owner land in the VTOL. The master shot some light beam that hit somewhere on his plane, but somehow he barely escaped from crashing and made it over the rocky mountain.”

“Owner? Don’t you mean the mayor?” I asked. The VTOL with a damaged fuselage could only be the mayor’s Pegasus, right?

“The mayor wasn’t aboard,” answered Jeff, negating my question. “The only people at Mine #4 were the owner and his bodyguards.”

“Really...”

“Hey! It’s no good,” shouted Yuri, coming back toward us. “It isn’t strong enough. If we could somehow overload its circuits that might work, but this isn’t going to be enough. We need a more powerful energy source.”

“The beam cannon was still there. The power unit was still attached,” replied Jeff. He was still a bit hazy, but ready to rise to the occasion. That was our Jeff! Even in his state he was able to spot the important survival items on his way over to us. For a moment I was entranced, and just took in that handsome face.

“Kei!” Yuri shouted in a pointed tone.

Loudmouth. I was in my happy place.

“Up! Look! It’s coming down!” she screamed in a panic.

“What?”

That voice put me on edge.

I quickly looked up.

That’s when I noticed it. Our surroundings were darkened by its shadow.

I looked straight up.

Whoa!

A saucer.

Its altitude was only four or five hundred meters.

This single saucer was coming down onto the plaza.

4

The saucer touched down. Four long legs made up the landing gear, and it settled softly on the stone plaza. The ship sunk as the quiet shock absorbers cushioned the landing.

The ship was about twenty meters across. Not a particularly large size.

The round hatch in its center opened and a gangway came down.

A hatch on the ship's side also opened up. It was an oval-shaped door that opened from the bottom to the top. No stairs came out from this one.

At first, two mobile infantrymen appeared at the side door, and then jumped away using jet propulsion packs. One of the mecha-infantrymen carried a hand blaster, but the other one didn't have a blaster in hand, but did have what looked like a big box on his right shoulder. What was that? Some kind of new weapon?

The two mobile infantry fighters arced through the sky, and flew behind the three of us, who were facing the saucer.

Maneuvering their reverse jets with amazing skill, they landed, standing so very delicately, hardly stirring up the dust.

The muzzle of the hand blaster pointed straight at us. The shoulder-mounted-box-carrying infantryman had the laser beam cannon on his left shoulder readied and pointed at us as well. Whether they were pointing their weapons aggressively or defensively wasn't clear, but either way it felt creepy.

For a moment I turned away from the events at my back and turned my gaze to the gangplank that had descended from the single saucer.

It was right at that moment that from the rear of the hatch I could see a large figure emerge. Its shape was as wide as the hatch itself, and if it didn't come out right, it might get stuck. What was this giant being? At first I thought the gangplank was for the mobile infantry fighters.

But that wasn't right. It was for this living being.

The large body wrapped in a beige jumpsuit got stuck several times before making it through.

The gangplank bent under the weight.

Now the full body was revealed.

It was the owner.

The owner came walking to where we were.

As he walked his round beady eyes looked us over. His three chins wiggled to the rhythm of his steps.

I got it now. A member of Lucifer would have an ample supply of powered suits.

From the corner of the owner's meaty mouth came a slight chuckle.

He stopped and stood just in front of us.

"We've got most of the miners under control," he elated proudly, sticking out his chest. Even the special material of his jumpsuit looked like it was stretched as far as it could go. "We really turned the tables on them."

With a triumphant gleam in his eyes he looked at the mobile infantry. One had been destroyed by the master, but three mobile infantries together with eight highly maneuverable fighters overtook the five hundred Children of God. Their defense was up to fifty armored soldiers. If you thought about the difference in their fighting strength, it was easy to guess who would be victorious.

"I am amazed you were able to find us," Yuri said coolly. She still had the hand blaster, but carried it loosely.

"This camouflage was a real worry," said the owner as he looked up at the fog in the sky. "And on top of that, I take my eyes off here for a moment, and look what they put up."

The owner turned around and gestured toward the temple with his chin.

"You must be short-handed in the human resources department. Your manager really dropped the ball on this one."

Yuri made this severe statement rather frankly.

"Yes, that's true," replied the owner, his shoulders drooping. "But the balance sheet always added up in the end."

"Huh? You mean Lucifer, right?" I slipped in, sensing good timing. I watched to see his reaction.

"Well, something, you see."

The disappointing answers returned. Even with his secret revealed, he remained completely calm.

“The owner and Lucifer? That’s not possible...”

Instead of stirring up the owner, we ended up getting a rise out of Jeff.

“No matter what organization I associate myself with, I work for one person. Me,” said the owner. “No one can stop me from doing whatever it is I want.”

“Whatever you want? What is it that you are trying to get?” I asked.

“The power the master has obtained,” he answered. “It’s clearly too dangerous in the hands of a normal person. Now, if I could get my hands on it, we could really put it to use.”

“So what are you planning for us, now that we know your secret?”

This time it was Yuri who asked the question.

“Are you going to execute us, gangland style?”

“Nothing of the sort!”

The owner shook his head in an exaggerated gesture. His neck was hidden under his chins, so if he didn’t overdo this movement the other person couldn’t catch its meaning.

“I have some work I am thinking I need some help with. Help from you. Very much alive.”

“Help?”

It wasn’t clear to Yuri or me what he was talking about.

“The master is in possession of a dangerous monster. I have gotten evidence of this from here and there. And according to my sources he pulled the strings on the Landis incident. That one was just practice.”

“You are talking about the invisible fangs,” I said.

“Right. And in the written report it also said this. The fangs don’t like Mugis. At least that’s what my limited information implies.”

“So, you want to borrow Mugi.”

“A Mugi is a dreadful beast that cannot fall to the inferior invisible fangs. Even if I wished to borrow it, he wouldn’t come without his owners.”

“You have been studying up, huh?” said Yuri.

“Thanks to you, I escaped from the master’s trap, and then followed the Absolute Children of God to their temple.”

The owner chuckled softly again.

“Mugi was trapped in an electric net,” said Yuri, pointing a finger at the curled up Mugi lying on the ground. “Can you help him?”

“Jeremy!”

Instead of answering Yuri, the owner waved his right hand lightly.

One of the mobile infantrymen carrying a hand blaster smoothly leapt into the air. Clearing at least twenty meters, he landed next to Mugi.

He adjusted the shoulder-mounted beam cannon and lined it up.

An energy beam thinner than a thread blasted out at Mugi.

The electric net crackled noisily. Sparks began to fly and it grew thicker.

To the naked eye, the energy beam didn’t look like much, but it was dozens of times more powerful than a hand blaster.

Electricity was arcing through the air prominently, higher and higher as the beam continued shooting. The threads of the net began to break, and then disappeared completely. We couldn’t see Mugi’s body at all.

The electricity radiated brightly and an orange orb glowed in the air.

The bright ball turned to flame.

It happened so abruptly. The flames blew out like an explosion and grew suddenly to a several-meter-wide fireball.

Even though we were over ten meters away, the heat blast toasted us.

The air was so hot, it was hard to breathe.

The flames split.

Split right in two. And at the same time, a black shadow emerged.

It was Mugi.

Mugi did one flip in the air, and without a sound landed on the stone plaza floor.

“Mgyaa!”

Crying out once, his entire body moved as if he was trying to shake something off his back.

He truly is an amazing creature. Even though his body was exposed to that much energy, he appeared to be uninjured and in good shape.

“Your wish has been granted,” said the owner, turning to us.

“Now do you think you can return the favor?”

5

“What is it that you want us to do?” asked Yuri.

“Where did the master go?”

“Inside that temple,” I answered.

“Then you lead the way into the temple.”

“Grrr,” Mugi growled. He didn’t take kindly to the owner’s arrogant attitude.

“Keep quiet, or your beautiful keepers will be burnt to charcoal,” the owner threatened Mugi. That was sure ballsy. But he got our description right, so it was forgivable.

“You coward! Using women as a shield, it’s downright indecent.”

Despite my kindness, Jeff gave the owner an earful. Jeff couldn’t help being sincere, even to a devil.

“It’s all right, Jeff,” I said calming the piping-hot sheriff. “We’ll go in first...”

I glared at the owner.

“We’d like to have a look at what the owner received.”

“And the mystery of the black egg, too,” Yuri attached to the end of my sentence.

We turned to the temple and began walking.

Mugi was in front.

This was just natural.

After Mugi was Jeff. He wasn't about to allow us to go ahead of him. He took the hand blaster from Yuri and puffing up his chest went forward confidently.

We came after Jeff. We each had a ray gun given to us by the owner. The reason was that they couldn't penetrate the special material of his jumpsuit. That's how almost useless they were. But they were better than nothing. Behind us was the hand blaster-packing mobile infantryman. Finally was the mobile infantryman with the mysterious box mounted on his shoulder. The owner was sandwiched between the two mobile infantry, and faced the temple. We moved ahead with courage, but the owner was being a wimp.

“I bet the owner wishes he had his own powered suit,” Yuri whispered to me.

“But they don't make them in his size,” I returned, giving a sideways glance at the hobbling and rotund owner. “He'd have to order it specially made.”

We both giggled quietly. Hearing nothing, the owner maintained his stern expression, and followed us to the temple. Seeing that made us giggle even harder.

We reached the temple gate as our laughs reached manic levels.

We had to pull ourselves together, as this was where things were going to get serious.

The entrance was made up of a series of stone pillars. There seemed to be some sort of pattern, but it didn't make any sense to me. For starters, there were about ten round stone pillars lined up, and the entryway came after that and continued into the temple.

We cautiously walked down this pathway.

We used the shadows cast off the pillars as cover. After making sure there wasn't an ambush waiting for us, we ran to the shadow of the next pillar.

The only ones walking down the center of the pathway with no fear were Mugi and the mobile infantry.

Without warning the pathway ended and we were in the center of the temple. Since there was no lighting, it suddenly got rather dark. Still, it was a bare space with no cover to hide behind. If this was going to be the case, we'd probably be better off strolling in boldly with the others and not trying to find something we couldn't see anyway.

We ran into a door.

It was a big door. It must have been five meters tall. And it was close to eight meters wide. A joint ran through the center, and we either had to pull or push here to open it. Nothing happened when we stood in front of it, so there was nothing to indicate that it was an automatic door. It looked to be made of alloy. That's what I thought, at least. I really couldn't be sure.

"Grrrr..."

Mugi stared straight at the door.

We immediately slid our bodies to the wall. Mugi began probing around. I was worried that the door might suddenly open up. I sent the two mobile infantrymen to stand in front of the door, and as a precaution we prepared our weapons.

It was a good thing, too.

The door opened up toward us. As large as the door was, it moved smoothly and silently.

Yuri and I had our ray guns out.

Jeff was also on edge, but it was the owner whose heavy breathing was actually audible.

However.

Nothing happened.

No electric bolts flying through the air or walls of flame coming at us.

What a letdown. But in these circumstances nothing was better than

something.

Mugi casually walked through the doorway.

Jeff gulped, and then followed Mugi in.

That meant Yuri and I were next. Getting as low as possible, we rushed through the door.

Inside it was dim, and it wasn't immediately clear how large this big room was. One side seemed to be covered in some kind of thick, slow-moving fog or mist, and made the whole area appear very vague and ambiguous.

The owner came in flanked by the mobile infantry soldiers. Quite a grand entrance.

And at that moment.

The door shut closed.

There was no time to stop it. Even the mobile infantrymen didn't have a chance to jam a hand in the doorway. In a panic Jeremy was about to try to burn through the door using his beam cannon, but I rushed to stop him.

We could try that later. For now we just needed to figure out where we were and what was going on.

"Grrrr," Mugi growled again.

He was ahead of us his legs frozen in place. His body was low to the ground and he was staring straight ahead.

The fog began to clear. It appeared to brighten up.

The full structure of this wide space came into view.

There were human-like figures to the left and right.

They appeared to be attached to the floor.

I held the ray gun in front of me. The floor also appeared to be made of alloy. I felt an icy pang in my gut. The mobile infantrymen turned on their head lamps.

They illuminated the figures.

What the—

These were statues—part human part animal, they had mysterious limbs I couldn't quite grasp. Angels of Chakra. They measured about two meters in height, and their shape was very similar to the ten centimeter figure we'd seen at the mayor's mountain retreat. Naturally, it was the same as the one we'd seen in the clairvoyant vision. It wasn't made of stone, but of that unknown metal, I guessed. The situation being as it was, I wasn't going to worry about making sure.

All together there were about ten Angels of Chakra lined up. What I thought were people were all Angels of Chakra.

So what was Mugi growling and baring his fangs at?

I moved to where Mugi was positioned.

There was a clear break in the lingering mist.

He was looking into the darkness.

A dense, soggy fluid mass of darkness.

This dark mass, which reflected absolutely no light existed just before our eyes and filled the air.

Could it be that this was the side of the egg?

"Kei, the floor—" said Yuri as she pointed. I strained my eyes to see what she was talking about.

Someone was there!

In front of the dark mass someone was crouched down, turned with his back to us. The white robe he wore blended into the ashcolored floor, and that's why I hadn't noticed him sooner.

This was who Mugi was growling at.

But who was it?

The robe moved.

His body rose and he smoothly stood up.

He rotated around as if he was sliding.

Above the white robe rested a smooth silver mask.

As I'd expected, it was the master.

Mobile infantryman Jeffrey pushed past us and stood in front.

Ready to kill, he held his hand blaster at his chest.

"We have you cornered, master!"

The owner went to Jeremy's side.

His tone was ice cold.

"Now it's time to settle this."

6

"Have me cornered? What a funny thing to say. You must be so thrilled having the Gods of Destruction join your team."

The master laughed.

"Not another word!" the owner threatened. "Your 'children' have been kicked out. Now give up and give me the Boralura's secret. If you do what I say nicely I won't take your life, as well."

"Boralura!" I screamed. "You know about Boralura?"

"I know enough," said the owner. "It's a life-form from another dimension that made contact with this planet. It supposedly doesn't have a finite form, but normally it's like those..."

He gestured toward the Angels of Chakra with his chin.

"Shaped like some deformed elephant. The master, through some mental or physical contact, snatched the power."

"You didn't say anything about that before!" I protested.

"You didn't ask."

"How do you know all this?"

“Because Galbaldy stole that elephant and brought it to the mayor’s source. He wanted to make some sort of deal. He ended up being cheated with a smaller than expected sum of cash, and then Galbaldy lost his life to the master.”

“Galbaldy and the master were close?”

“He was the master’s biological father.”

Wha-wha—!!

Not prepared for that tidbit, I was knocked back about ten thousand light years.

“Owner, so from the very beginning you knew the Absolute Children of God were involved in this matter,” stated Yuri. “You knew, and that’s why you weren’t honest when we asked about Landis.”

“I don’t remember that conversation. Too far back,” he replied, turning away.

“By the greatness of Boralura!” the master suddenly spat out madly. “Only those chosen by Boralura can bond with his spirit. To the chosen are given infinite power.”

“And you are telling me that’s you?” asked the owner.

“Yes. And I will not only tell you...”

The master turned from us.

He raised up his left hand, pointing to the darkness.

The darkness changed. That area solidified and all color was instantly gone. There an image appeared.

In the center of the darkness a screen appeared.

The owner, Yuri, and I were all dumbfounded and speechless.

The image was of the rocky mountain. Near the bottom I could see the tunnel. It was Mine #16. The spot where all the Children of God had tried to escape to. The owner’s mobile infantry and flyers had made their attack there.

“Aah!”

The owner's face turned pale.

The screen showed a view above the ground. The screen was filled with the destroyed parts from powered suits and highly maneuverable flyers. And then the saucers.

Places on the powered suits and flyers had melted, and other parts were just pieces torn off. The wreckage was strewn all across the ground.

"What the hell is the meaning of this?"

The owner had believed without a doubt in the superiority of his military. Seeing this unexpected scene sent his body into jiggly spasms.

"It means this."

The camera angle moved from the surface of the ground up. With the grayish-white haze in the background, a single, undamaged fighter entered the frame. Having lost his fellow flyers, the pilot who still had his plane was awaiting further orders as he circled the battlefield.

The master lifted his right hand and squeezed it into a fist. Then his index finger shot out.

His finger lit up.

At the same moment an electric bolt struck the solo fighter on the view screen. It looked like he was hit by lightning. The persistent bolts that split the sky struck the target until, after a few moments, the fighter was destroyed. The explosion sent fiery pieces of the plane in every direction.

The screen went blank.

"So now I have to ask, who has cornered whom?" asked the master, turning back to us. "Your military is destroyed. Just as I had hoped, this will all be settled here."

"You son of a..."

The owner spoke through grinding teeth.

The mobile infantryman aimed his hand blaster at the master.

The master's finger grew bright again.

A beam shot out.

The bright ray burned up the hand blaster.

The mobile infantryman threw down the burning weapon and bounded into the air. His movements were dizzying as he escaped.

“Of all the people on the planet, I am the sacred son Boralura chose. But there is an evil disciple chosen by the cursed beast among us,” said the master. “Show yourself, Yaksha!”

The master crossed his fingers, closed his eyes, and concentrated.

“Unh!”

Suddenly Jeff yelped in pain.

It truly came from out of nowhere.

Holding his head in his hands he fell to the floor, writhing.

“Jeff!”

Yuri and I were thrown in to such a panic that there was nothing we could do.

“Gauuuu!”

Mugi turned to the fallen Jeff and called out. His attitude shifted to hostility. I could see the fire in his eyes as he stared at Jeff.

Jeff turned and looked up. His arms and legs were in convulsions and were slapping against the floor. His mouth was open wide, and it looked like he was screaming from the bottom of his soul, but no sound emerged.

What had just happened to Jeff?

As suddenly as they began, Jeff’s spasms stopped. Turning away, with his mouth still wide open, he was frozen in place. He passed out. His pupils dilated, losing any focus.

“Gyaon!”

Mugi leapt into the air. He bounded toward the fallen Jeff.

I didn’t know what was going on.

Mugi jumped straight at Jeff. This was bad. I had no way to stop him.

“No!” I screamed with all my might.

Mugi’s claws barely avoided slicing through Jeff’s face.

But his face was untouched.

Mugi’s body landed on the other side of Jeff’s. I thought that Mugi had intended to kill Jeff. But Jeff was not the target.

Sparks flew.

Mugi had locked jaws with something that wasn’t visible to us.

Whatever it was had settled right above Jeff’s body. This was where Mugi had begun his attack on an invisible enemy.

Wha—? What?

Jeff vomited the invisible fangs?

With an ear-piercing blast, one of the Angels of Chakra collapsed. There was no doubt that we would find those distinctive tooth marks in the rubble.

This was impossible. A lie. Impossible! Unthinkable!

The invisible fangs came out of Jeff?!

How could that be?

7

It was no lie.

Yaksha, the beast from another dimension, used Jeff as an intermediary to come to this world. The master received power from Boralura, but, at the same time Jeff received power from Yaksha. Both of them could make contact with life-forms in different dimensions, the problem was the latent psychic ability of the host that they chose. Boralura’s power seemed to match with the master well, and Yaksha lined up with Jeff.

The difference between Boralura and Yaksha was that Yaksha wasn’t as powerful, and was evil. That wasn’t true of Jeff’s real nature.

But Jeff wasn't actually Yaksha.

Stupid. Why didn't Boralura go to Jeff and Yaksha go to the master. It would have been so much simpler in that case. It all would have played out more peacefully. Wicked Yaksha didn't reach Boralura's level of power. It was a good way to pull the strings. If Boralura had come to Jeff it would have been the perfect encounter of mankind and a higher being from another dimension.

Because the opposite happened we had this disastrous situation.

Numbskull. Boralura was an idiot.

That's right. I was cursing Boralura's name.

I knew it wouldn't do any good, but it was all I could do.

And then—

A violent battle between Mugi and Yaksha began to unfold in the open area. Most of the Angels of Chakra were smashed in the fighting. They were supposed to be made of that super strong metal, but they broke into tiny pieces pretty easily. These must have been replicas the master made for some kind of ritual or ceremony.

The walls and pillars of the large room suffered heavy damage as well. Yaksha chomped through anything he could get a hold of, and since Mugi couldn't see him, Mugi was swinging blindly with his front claws. At the level these two beasts were rampaging, the walls, pillars, and everything else in this room would likely be unrecognizable by the time it was done.

The owner and the two mobile infantrymen didn't know what to do.

It was because they couldn't see what they wanted to shoot. Also if they missed and hit Mugi, who was wrapped battle, he would likely come back to tear apart the powered suits to defend himself.

However, this was a dangerous and volatile situation, so they couldn't just give up.

Their chance arrived. The master was in full concentration controlling Yaksha.

Which meant...

He should be defenseless.

Seeing the opportunity, the owner commanded Jeremy.

Jeremy jumped. He has lost his hand blaster, so he prepared the beam cannon on his left shoulder. Swooping down from above, he fired the beam cannon aimed at the master as he drew closer to his target. The beam burned through the master.

Or that's what I thought.

The master's body radiated light. The beam then reflected back. The reflected beam came back more powerful than before, and the thicker ray returned to the barrel of the beam cannon.

The beam cannon exploded.

The shock blew Jeremy sideways.

He flew in a straight line toward the dark wall.

He hit the darkness.

There wasn't actually a wall there. It had a clear beginning, but the wall was really just darkness. It was neither liquid nor solid. But, it did have a wet, soggy sense to it that looked very dense.

That was the darkness that Jeremy flew into.

The powered suit was squashed. The armor was destroyed and the generator took a brutal hit.

Explosion.

Jeremy's body was in flames as he fell to the ground.

The master's eyes flew open.

"Only those chosen may enter Boralura's darkness," the master mumbled.

He then gave a pointed look at the owner.

The owner's legs shook.

Yaksha was coming.

Mugi switched directions and drew near the owner.

A high-pitched sound pierced the air.

It was an alarm to drive something away.

The something looked to be the owner's body.

The jumpsuit torn to pieces. Pieces of skin and flesh.

Fluttering in the air.

The owner was being bitten and torn apart by Yaksha.

Instant death. That's what Yuri and I assumed. Blood-smeared chunks of meat spattered the floor. There was no way we could help. No one could survive that attack. We were seeing the slaughter live and up close.

But.

What was left of the owner rolling on the floor, slowly began to rise up. The flesh had been peeled off of him. His face, chest, and abdomen were covered in cuts.

But there wasn't a drop of blood flowing from them.

What was torn from the owner's body wasn't his flesh.

This person standing there threw off the remaining scraps of "skin" from his body.

His name had changed.

This was not Telestofarnus.

This was Bonassis.

The owner and the mayor were one and the same.



Wearing an artificial skin as a disguise, the skinny mayor played the role of the giant owner. That's right. They were about the same height. The only real difference was the width and depth of their bodies. The difference in the voices was probably done electronically.

I suddenly remembered how Jeff said he escaped the trap in the VTOL thanks to the owner. So there wasn't a mix-up there. We were both correct. After escaping from Mine #4 he'd switched back into the mayor inside the plane.

The truth of this case was finally starting to surface.

The mayor, one of the secret leaders of Lucifer, worked out a deal for the sake of a Buddhist organization, and came to Chakra not only as the mayor, but also as the owner.

For political needs he was the mayor, and for business needs he was the owner. He skillfully spread himself between these two roles to rule the planet of Chakra.

But an unexpected situation arose. One of the miners was contacted by an alien life-form from another dimension and was given an incredible power. The mayor's secret would be exposed. So he had to handle that nuisance while unraveling the mystery of these beings from another dimension, but to ensure that the master wouldn't discover your secret, you had to move with extreme discretion. Inevitably, something had to be done about the master. You were resigned to that fact. By taking out the master, the mayor had a chance to get a handle on the situation.

And then the Landis incident had occurred. Having tied the master to the incident, he then called in the help of the WWWA.

It was a bit of a gamble. If the case was accepted, then a WWWA Trouble Consultant would be dispatched. The aim was for the TC to get here and mix it up with the master. And by the remote chance that the case wasn't solved, there was no evidence that the mayor was working against the master.

On the other hand, the master being the master, he'd caught wind that the mayor was the one who'd made a case to the WWWA. He then sent assassins to the WWWA Headquarters in an effort to block the investigation before it

even started. Those armored “shadows” were local miners, but they didn’t succeed in their mission. It seemed that the master had at least three believers on the mayor’s security staff. Point by point, information about the mayor could have been leaked in such a manner that it was as deadly as an assassin.

Dammit!

Figuring all this out caused my blood to run the other direction.

My temperature rose to a boil and I could sense my anger fuming inside.

Thanks to your little conspiracy, all of our glory just crashed and burned (and don’t even try to convince me otherwise).

Unforgivable.

I’d like to line you all up and slap you one-by-one.

8

“Chk!”

Seeing us seeing him in his true form, the mayor clicked his tongue.

Extending a finger, he gave a signal to the one remaining mobile infantryman.

He detached the box he had been carrying on his shoulder.

With no distinct markings, it looked like an average, everyday box.

The mayor sped to the front of the box. He pressed a button on the side. One side of the box lifted open like a door. At the same time, the parts folded up inside opened up at different places on the box, springing out all over the place.

The mayor crawled into the box.

The door closed.

The box was really a body. The parts that had emerged formed arms, legs, and a head.

I had never seen anything like this before.

A compacted powered suit.

That made sense. The owner's body wouldn't fit into any normal powered suit, but as the mayor he could.

He began to move.

He picked up the hand blaster that had fallen next to Jeff. Jeff had tossed it away when he was writhing in agony. The mayor must have noticed that. It was his in the first place, so there wasn't anything we could say.

The open area became as still as death. At a surprising moment, considering the circumstances, all movement and talking ceased at the same time.

Of course, this included Yuri and me, as well as the mayor and master, and also Mugi and Yaksha. All perfectly still.

Bound together by this weird coincidence, I held my breath for a moment.

A strange air pocket in the midst of battle.

The mayor immediately took advantage. He wasn't only armed with a beam cannon and a hand blaster. He was also equipped with mini missiles, hyper-grenades, and other weapons of mass destruction. This extreme hardware could be expected of the mayor's suit, and the mobile infantryman who carried it all this time was also specially equipped.

The mayor went all in on this coincidental moment in time.

Firing everything at once, he was trying to destroy the temple and everything in it, including the master and us.

It would take more than a little luck for us to exit this situation victorious, much less alive. We were usually able to push fate a bit to help us through. And if our luck never arrived, we would have to take on the master without any weapons.

Suddenly both powered suits were surrounded by bright red flames.

At first I thought this was a suicide attack, but that wasn't the case.

The missiles fired in a constant stream and the hyper-grenades shot out in every direction. With no aiming or target, they shot off every weapon they had,

including their beam cannons, laser rifles, and hand blasters.

The dim open space lit up with bright beams flying all over the place.

It looked a lot like the master when he lit himself up.

The missiles and hyper-grenades exploded randomly around the wide-open space.

There was a break in the emptiness.

Yaksha moved, and when the master turned his body, Mugi took off running.

And then there was us.

And then there was us with nothing we could do.

The floor in front of us rumbled up with a tremendous roar.

Yuri and I grabbed each other's hands for support.

And all we had were these toy ray guns for defense. We both struck pissed-off poses, as that would do about as much good as anything else.

Mugi rushed to us.

He covered us with his body.

The blasts and falling scrap and embers continued on.

Mugi protected us from the raining debris.

This was no single tiny explosion.

A series of explosions went off here and there. Some blasted into each other, creating small tornados.

Even Mugi couldn't withstand the battering.

"Kyaa!"

Mugi, Yuri, and I were pulled together into the air. Wrenched from our place, our bodies floated through the air. Dangling like a trio of rag dolls, we were thrown to the rear of the temple.

In other words, toward the darkness.

The darkness that only those chosen by Boralura could enter.

If we couldn't enter we would be slammed against the darkness and flattened.

No! Somebody help!

I wanted to scream, but even if I could, the words wouldn't come out in time.

The darkness grew closer.

The fact I wasn't alone was a little reassurance. To reduce the small chance that Yuri alone would get away, I gripped her hand even tighter.

The darkness was right in front of us.

We slammed into it.

Swoosh.

And went through.

Huh? There wasn't really time to wonder.

We began to fall down head over heels.

Into the ebony darkness.

There was nothing above or below, or anywhere in between, but there was little question about the sensation of falling.

"Hyaa!"

Yuri and I both screamed together.

The darkness didn't have a bottom. Falling in a place that didn't have a bottom meant that we would be falling forever.

Don't even joke about something like that.

I don't care how or where, but make it stop.

That was the only wish I made.

And that's when.

My wish came true.

It was that sudden.

In the middle of the black, we immediately stopped.

But it wasn't as if we had landed on the ground somewhere. It was as if we were suddenly weightless. We weren't falling, and at the same time we weren't rising, either. We were simply floating. Naturally, the "we" included Yuri and Mugi. I knew this because I was still holding on to Yuri's hand and I could feel Mugi's tail wrapped around my leg.

What was really strange was that even though we were surrounded in darkness, I could clearly see Yuri and Mugi. It wasn't as if we were glowing or anything, so why was it we could see each other?

It's because you aren't seeing their bodies. You are seeing their spirits.
Someone gently told me the answer.

Someone?

Who?

I quickly looked all around. But besides Mugi and Yuri, no one else was around. The darkness around us seemed to spread even farther, though.

We are Boralura.

Again, I could hear a voice resonate.

And they say they are Boralura!

Wasn't expecting that!

You have nothing to fear.

Boralura spoke again.

You have made contact with Boralura. You have entered the field, and your physical bodies have been set in the contact area.

"When you say 'field,' do you mean the black egg?" I asked.

Yes.

"Then that means we are in the egg right now?"

This is such an ambiguous state, but in simple terms you are not mistaken.

"Then why don't you just say she is right?" asked Yuri sourly. Birdbrain! Back off! There's no need to throw in unnecessary comments. What are you going to

do if Boralura decides to get angry?

We do not get angry.

Boralura spoke again. Hoo boy. Everything I was thinking was heard. Everything.

“You are the different life-form from another dimension that contacted the master, right?” asked Yuri

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That is another ambiguous situation, but we will respond in the affirmative.

“Which part is ambiguous?” I asked.

Saying different life form from another dimension. The basic concept is correct.

Suddenly a huge amount of information came streaming into our brains. It was impossible to grasp the complexity of what I was seeing. My brain cells felt like they were all about to pop.

“Sto-stop!”

I finally mustered the energy to speak.

“That’s enough. Let’s just speak in vague terms.”

A hand raised in the air.

“Why does Boralura support the master?” asked Yuri, after taking a deep breath.

He is the only contact we have had with mankind.

“I think you made a poor choice in choosing him,” I said. “Now this world is in complete chaos because of it.”

We have no malicious intent. The negative results in this case are due to human mentality.

"I can see that," I said nodding my head. Boralura was measuring cultures on relative terms. From the master's perspective, he was contacted by an absolute god.

We are seeking friendly relations with mankind. Borlura continued.

For that reason we prepared the field, in order to foster the opportunity.

"But you set limitations on who is allowed to make contact."

Are you saying we have acted in error?

"Well, there is room for improvement, if you can find a way."

The field can only exist right here. Ishana is needed to establish the field. In your concept of space, Ishana only exists here. And even still, it is an extremely minuscule amount.

"Ishana? What's that?"

It is a very rare element. Mankind has not yet discovered it.

No doubt about that. If this was the only spot in our entire universe where it exists, then of course no one knew about it.

If a new contact is appropriate here, then we would ask to start over from the beginning. Doing so we can find harmony with humanity and start a wonderful new era together.

That does sound pretty terrific.

Infinite possibilities are hidden within humanity's abilities. With our help, mankind can jump beyond the limited state of today, and bloom into something new and great.

"That sounds like the way to go," I said, nodding my head.

I mean, this was the Boralura who passed to the master his amazing powers. Put to good use, this could mean a bright future for the human race.

This will be the first and last interaction at this place of Ishana between humans and Boralura. Once this field eventually disappears, we will likely be unable to visit this place again.

"Got it. It all makes sense on this end," I said. "And are you going to let us get

us back to the temple before that happens?”

Of course.

“Can you lead the way?”

Let your consciousness go, Boralura stated softly.

The connection will be severed.

And it was just as Boralura said.

I closed my eyes and relaxed my consciousness. It wasn't difficult at all. This was one of the skills we practiced when honing our psychic abilities when training at the WWWA. This was probably also the reason we were able to make contact with Boralura so easily. Together as one, the two of us are espers. The master said he was chosen. I got the feeling that the chosen ones were probably all espers.

The darkness began to flow back. This time there was not a sense of falling, but of floating.

We continued to float, being sucked up to higher and higher altitudes.

That's what it felt like, anyway.

Our speed increased.

And then a sense of deceleration.

There was a light shock.

We coiled through the muggy skin of the darkness.

I opened my eyes.

We were back in our world.

I was still holding Yuri's hand.

I was in a daze for several moments.

There was nothing left of the temple.

It was in complete ruins.

Turning around, the gigantic black egg looked as if it had been shelled. In front

of it was broken pillars and crushed walls along with other wreckage. If you had never seen the temple, you probably wouldn't be able to tell what the building was just by looking at the wreckage. The only thing that wasn't crushed or crumbled was one single Angel of Chakra. But there had been ten of these earlier. Well, even just one still standing was a miracle.

Right near the undamaged Angel of Chakra lay Jeff. The handsome sheriff was still frozen. Yaksha hadn't returned then. I wanted him to open his eyes soon. He wasn't at full hunk mode in this state.

Just a little ways away, something caught my attention on the stone plaza. It was the saucer the mayor had flown in on. Yuri and I went to check it out. Two of the four landing gear legs were broken and bent. Other than that, the damage was minor. My guess was that it could fly.

"I wonder if the mayor won his bet," said Yuri, out of the blue, as she examined the saucer.

"I don't see him anywhere," I responded, shading my eyes with one hand and looking across the horizon.

"He got away. He wasn't going to try to continue all on his own. It would be impossible."

"Grrrr," grumbled Mugi.

Mugi looked to his side. He was glaring at Mine #16, where the Children of God had flocked to. A fierce battle appeared to have taken place. It looked like either the Children of God had been completely annihilated, or whoever was left had run for the hills.

I went over to Mugi's side.

Mugi was still growling.

The rumble in his throat grew louder. His feelers began to whip around, and the matted whiskers that looked like ears twisted around delicately.

It couldn't be.

I tried to follow Mugi's eyes.

Then, at the next moment.

Mine #16 collapsed.

At first the mountain that housed the tunnel grew in size, and then it fell in on itself.

The implosion sounded like a bomb going off, and the sound echoed throughout.

There must have been a gigantic explosion inside the mountain.

As rock and sand filled the tunnel, the mountain flattened out.

The air filled with dust.

Something spewed out.

At first I thought it was another smaller explosion, but that wasn't it. Chunks of rock and dirt clods erupted into the air, and in the center of the geyser was something silver and shiny. The luminous point had distinct features.

It was coming our direction at a frightening speed.

It wasn't flying.

It had jumped.

Which could only mean—this was a powered suit.

“Gyaon!” Mugi cried.

Again, instead of running, we stood ready to fight.

The powered suit landed a little ways from where we stood. Could it be the mayor, or another one of the mobile infantry? We couldn't tell, yet.

He would be able to reach us in one more bound.

He jumped again.

That's where it got him.

The powered suit was suddenly pulled at a right angle.

His left leg was being chewed up.

It was the invisible jaws, Yaksha.

“Gyaon!”

Mugi took off.

He leapt toward Yaksha in an effort to restart the fight they'd never gotten to finish.

The mangled powered suit began to descend.

He had completely lost his balance. He was really crashing more than descending.

The powered suit landed at the edge of the plaza.

The hatch opened up. The person inside revealed his face.

It was the mayor.

His face was pale. It had taken an ashen color. The left leg of the powered suit had been bitten off. I could only see his upper body at the moment, but I was expecting to see that the mayor's leg was severely injured, as well. He'd likely lost a lot of blood.

It was a safe bet.

The mayor looked at us like he was trying to say something. His lips were moving, but no sound came out.

"Kei!" Yuri screamed. She pointed her left hand up into the sky.

I turned my head to look.

Armored warrior. A single soldier with a hand jet attached to his back descended from the sky and drew closer to where we stood.

"That's the master!" said Yuri. "He switched his mask to a helmet."

The master, now outfitted in armor, slowly descended on the open area.

He landed right between us and the mayor.

He glanced at us, and then turned towards the mayor.

He pointed a finger at the mayor.

Bright light.

A bright beam blasted the mayor in the chest.

The powered suit began to burn, as well.

The suit erupted in flames.

The dark red flames scorched the ground.

“You two lived, I see.”

His mask sparkling white, the master turned to face us.

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We stood face-to-face with the master in the stone plaza.

No one else was around. Jeff was laid-out and unconscious. The deadly battle between Mugi and Yaksha had spread to the rocky mountain.

So that just left the three of us.

“So you waited until the end to show up,” said the master. “Is there something you’d like to say to me?”

“Nope, not especially,” I replied. “But it sounds like you have something to bark about.”

“Look at you,” laughed the master. “Even without a decent weapon, you still talk like you can actually hurt me.”

“You don’t think we can, do you?” asked Yuri.

“If you think you are the only almighty here, you have made a huge mistake.”

“Wha-what?”

“How do you like this?”

Yuri and I joined hands. Then I stuck out my left hand as Yuri stuck out her right. We brought our hands around and both pointed our index fingers at the master.

Two white beams shot out from the tips of our fingers.

“Uwaa!”

The master's chest plate burned as he was thrown backward.

The strap holding the hand jet burned through. This important piece of equipment slid off the master's back.

Lucky for him, the cut was superficial. However, the psychological damage was more than a little deep.

"You-you evil..."

His voice was shaking.

"We told you. We said there is more than one almighty," I said smugly.

"You-you were chosen? Chosen by Boralura..."

"This power is nice and all, but it kinda stinks that it only works when you are near the egg," said Yuri. "You were just trying to compromise the mayor, right? If you could use the power anywhere there would be no need to share the rule of Chakra with him."

"And yet, you had your sights set on world domination. I can tell by your personality," I picked up where Yuri left off to sum it up.

"..."

The master had nothing to say in response. His entire body vibrated in anger as he stood in place.

"You used Yaksha because you couldn't act on your own, right?" I added. "You waited for it to grow up, then used it as a hitman. And you had it using Jeff's amazing body for transport, so you could make it appear and disappear as you pleased."

"..."

"Master, you are a piece of human trash."

"Rrrrr," he growled.

"If you leave this place, you go back to being just a normal person. If you will let us, we'll arrest you quietly and with no pain."

"Shut up!" the master screamed. "Do you think this is over? Are you truly that insane?"

“Are you resisting arrest?”

Our fingers were still pointed at the master.

“Me? I still haven’t played my trump card,” said the master. “So here comes the time to show it.”

As he spoke he broke into a run.

We blasted another pair of beams.

One hit his shoulder and the other his back.

But he didn’t seem to be affected. He had put a barrier around his body to counter the beams.

And he was fast. He was moving at an amazing speed. Using his energy like rocket fuel, he streaked across the plaza.

He reached the Angel of Chakra.

Spinning on one heel, he scooped up the elephant figure onto his back. The Angel of Chakra radiated a pale blue glow. It was a faint, phosphorescent light. The glow spread to include the master.

We shot our finger beams at the master again. Hidden within the bright glow, the master became one with the figure.

“Gods of Destruction!”

I could hear the master’s voice.

“You two were on good terms with the empty-headed sheriff, I believe.”

What was this freak getting at?

“So what would you say if I did this?”

This? What is this?! I was about to ask. I never got a chance.

It was because Mugi and Yaksha returned to the plaza.

More accurately, Yaksha was coming this way, and Mugi was chasing after it.

I felt a tremendous pressure blow over my body.

Mugi zipped like a black shadow, and followed it.

The path of Yaksha.

Toward Jeff.

So it was going to escape by entering Jeff again.

Then Jeff would return to normal, and wake up, right?

What was the this the master was blabbering about?

And that is when.

My prediction was a little optimistic.

The master was in complete control of the full-grown Yaksha.

I had forgotten about the strong power the egg gave off in this place.

If only we had prepared for this situation.

The Yaksha materialized.

The dimension beast Yaksha entered Jeff's body. At the same time, Jeff's body mutated. He immediately swelled up. His clothes were ripping, and soon he would be naked.

Naked Jeff!

But he wouldn't be shaped like a human. It would be just a giant meat blob. I wasn't sure how big he would get, or how far he could stretch.

Suddenly he expanded to over ten meters.

His body shifted to a shiny slimy pink flush. His arms and legs disappeared, and where the head ended and the body began wasn't very clear. Enormously big and round, it had mutated into a very unattractive creature. On its pink skin were black speckles scattered about, which made the creature even uglier.

But this wasn't the first time I had seen this beast. Where was it before?

Oh yeah.

In the clairvoyant vision.

When we were hanging off the crosses we'd had a vision, and that's when this creature had appeared to us before.

So the vision was of Yaksha's true form.

Now, before our eyes, the rolling Yaksha's mouth opened wide.

Half of Yaksha's body opened up.

It revealed the fangs that had left those unique bite marks.

It was repulsive. I couldn't remember seeing something so repugnant. But this ugly beast was our handsome Jeff.

"Kei!" Yuri screamed. "Get your finger ready. We can take this down. This monster."

Take it down? That meant taking down Jeff.

"It isn't Jeff," said Yuri. "That thing is Yaksha!"

Well, but, I know, but...

Prodded by Yuri, I pointed my index finger at Yaksha. With drool splattering around, Yaksha bared its teeth and dashed toward us. Its body was large and misshapen, but it still moved as fast and nimbly as it had when it was invisible.

"Pull it together! Now!" shouted Yuri, as she looked at me. I had no other choice.

The revolting Yaksha.

But overlapping it was Jeff's smiling face.

"No!"

I pointed my finger away.

"I can't! I can't shoot Jeff!"

I screamed at the top of my lungs.

11

Dammit. I couldn't stand it. I'd fallen for the master's trick. Even knowing it was a trick, I still couldn't go through with it.

“Chk!”

Yuri clicked her tongue in disgust. Yaksha was right in front of us and getting closer. If we didn't do something Yaksha would swallow us whole.

Mugi jumped.

Mugi had stopped chasing Yaksha once it entered Jeff. Mugi knew my feelings toward Jeff.

But the situation had changed. Not a time for niceties now. If Yaksha wasn't stopped we would be eaten.

Mugi landed on Yaksha's chin. Now that Yaksha had a physical body, fighting the monster would be easier for Mugi.

Yuri pulled my arm. “Kei, come on!”

As Mugi tried to stop Yaksha, she tried to put some distance between us and them.

Yuri pulled me toward the saucer. We went up the bent gangway, thorough the hatch, and into the cockpit.

Yuri grabbed a hold of the control lever. Setting off explosive bolts, she separated us from the landing gear and gangway, and closed the hatch.

The saucer moved up into the air. We ascended vertically about 30 meters before circling around. On the main screen appeared Yaksha grappling with Mugi.

Mugi was giving a good fight. Even in its materialized state, Yaksha was absurdly strong. Mugi's teeth and claws slipped on Yaksha's slimy skin, and the giant creature looked as if it could crush Mugi to death.

“Just wait, Mugi!”

Yuri turned the saucer.

The saucer's weapon was a large-scale laser cannon. That was it. Setting the laser cannon to full power, Yuri flew toward Yaksha.

Yuri aimed for its big, wide-open mouth.

A miss. The cannon fire wouldn't hit Yaksha. This must be the trump card the

master mentioned.

To test the theory, Yuri set the cannon's sights on the master, who had attached himself to the Angel of Chakra. Yuri fired the cannon, and again, the blasts were nowhere near on target.

Again, we had no fist to punch with.

"Gyan!"

Mugi was hit. Our strong-as-steel Mugi took a bite in the back, and screeched in pain.

To escape an inevitably painful death, Mugi jumped. Mugi landed on the body of the saucer. In fact, right on top of the cockpit. Using the camera to check his condition, we saw from the way his back was bent that he was hurt badly.

Seeing Mugi in this shape, I felt a stirring deep in my gut. A demon of my own was ready to be released.

"Change seats," I said, pushing Yuri out of the way.

Taking over the pilot's seat, I grabbed a hold of the control lever.

"What are you going to do?" asked Yuri.

"We have seen that thing before," I answered gruffly.

I brought the saucer down. I hovered the saucer between the Angel of Chakra and Yaksha.

I turned on the outside speaker.

"Brink it on, freak," I said as the ship faced Yaksha. "I'll give you a fight. If you want to take a bite of something, take a bite of this. This is it. Your final chance. Or are you not up to it?"

I was pushing Yaksha's buttons, and pushing them hard.

For the moment it was just Yaksha staring down the saucer and vice versa.

"What's the matter? You afraid of me?!"

I rained down a shower of laser cannon fire.

Yaksha moved.

And it moved fast.

It came straight at us. And what speed. In one breath it would close the distance between us.

“Hold on tight, Mugi!” I yelled into the mic.

The Yaksha came.

Its giant mouth was wide open and its teeth shined a wet reflection. Streams of drool ran out of its mouth.

Closer and closer.

Only a few meters left.

I punched the jets to maximum and slammed the throttle.

Painful G-forces.

It felt like my head was being beat with a nightstick.

The saucer went straight up into the air.

Yaksha missed us by only centimeters.

But Yaksha did continue at that speed into the Angel of Chakra.

I didn't slow down.

The saucer continued its rise through the atmosphere.

There was an explosion.

It was below the saucer. This was what happened when Yaksha and the Angel of Chakra came into contact. I don't know why it happened, but I did know that it would happen.

I mean, that's what we'd seen in our clairvoyant vision.

A white blast exploded out. It looked a lot like the flash we'd seen from Mine #1.

The blast swelled out in a round mass.

In order to avoid getting hit by the blast, I maintained our fullspeed upward progression. The main screen went crazy. The blast was too strong. Too bright.

From the window we could see the bright flash, but even that was so bright we had to look away.

It was so bright that tears actually started to stream down my face.

I didn't want Yuri to see me crying, so I slyly wiped them away.

But the tears didn't stop flowing.

High in the sky, we waited for the flash to fade away.

As quickly as it rose up, the flash disappeared.

Even though the white light had faded, we waited a few moments before examining the situation on the ground.

The mist covering the area slowly began to dissipate.

Other than that, nothing had changed. At least from this angle, it looked safe down there.

We began our descent.

The planet's surface had turned into an amazingly large crater.

The crater was a slick tan color, and smooth like a polished stone, reflecting a bright sheen. I estimated its diameter at over ten kilometers. The edge of the crater actually overlapped with the crater at Mine #4.

Other than that, the crater was empty. No temple. No Angel of Chakra. Also, no more black egg.

"Ishana certainly was a rare element, like they said," mumbled Yuri as she looked out at the crater.

"Yeah," I replied with a nod. I had a bad feeling. Something wasn't right.

"Wasn't the Angel of Chakra the symbol of Boralura?"

"Yeah."

"And Ishana was contained inside that Elephant Angel..."

"I see what you are getting at."

"When the Ishana is gone, the egg disappears."

“Yeah.”

“And if the Ishana is gone, then contact can’t happen again. I think that’s what I heard?”

“Me too.”

“Hmmm”

Yuri hummed quietly.

I did too.

And then it happened. Another blast of pressure came.

The landscape shook.

For a moment I thought our engines were acting up. Unfortunately, it was more complicated than that.

It was an earthquake.

After Mine #4 was turned to a crater there was an earthquake, too. The relatively fragile crust of Chakra couldn’t withstand such sudden blasts of energy, and the response was a seismic shift.

If the last earthquake could be called massive, then this earthquake was massively massive.

It went on for about ten minutes, and the tremors were violent. Watching from the sky, we could see mountains crumble and the earth tear open and swallow up entire hills. The smooth and shiny crater was now full of cracks and debris.

“Say, Kei,” Yuri said in a disturbingly composed tone of voice. “With this earthquake and everything, what happened to Aslaville?”

“What happened? Just...”

I couldn’t finish my sentence.

The answer was pretty clear by looking out the window.

epilogue

We headed back to Aslaville in the saucer.

Looking down at the destroyed highway below us gave a preview of Aslaville's fate.

From inside the cockpit, Yuri began to speak.

"Once we get back to *Lovely Angel*, we better let the chief know what happened."

It wasn't much different than turning ourselves in for a heinous crime.

"There are three things we need to tell him," said Yuri.

"What things?"

I didn't really want to hear the answer, but I asked anyway.

"Number one is that the case is solved."

Yuri stuck one finger in the air.

That was a good place to start.

"Number two is that we permanently severed ties with life from another dimension."

That one probably wouldn't go over so well.

"And number three is that there was a huge earthquake and that Chakra was completely devastated."

Yup, the really bad news.

I felt a heaviness in my chest.

I looked down on Aslaville from above.

From the outskirts to the city center, every building had collapsed. Downtown

was a sea of flames.

We gave up landing in the city. Even if we wanted to, there was no more heliport.

We decided to go straight to *Lovely Angel*.

The saucer arrived at the space port.

There we heard some even worse news.

The space port was out of commission.

Every landing strip was damaged. Not a single one wasn't torn up by the quake. Fires had broken out here and there as well.

Lovely Angel wasn't anywhere near the burning flames, but was damaged in a landing pad cave-in, and leaned to one side.

We were told it would take about two months before she would be in the air again. It was because this was a remote mining planet. They had neither the parts nor any experts in disaster recovery. In addition to that, the mayor and the owner were dead (well, it was the same person...), so there was no one to make any decisions.

We checked the communications system on the lurching *Lovely Angel*.

I wasn't sure if I should be happy or disappointed to discover that it was operational.

We then contacted headquarters.

Department Chief Soranaka's face appeared on the com screen.

He wore his usual stern expression.

"It appears to be communications on the Chakra case. Am I right?"

The chief spoke without a smile.

"Uh, yes... We did solve the case."

I stuttered through the three points we had discussed. At number two his face began to change color and at number three his hair began to stand on end.

"Reports on the Great Chakra Earthquake have already been coming in," said

the chief. "Casualty estimates are at 11,000 dead. Two-thirds of the entire population. Damage estimates are at 45 trillion credits. The planet is in such a state of destruction that reconstruction is impossible..."

"Oh, really?"

He did say 45 trillion. My brain couldn't wrap itself around the magnitude of a number that big.

"Umm...", said Yuri from my side.

"Yes? Is there another disaster you'd like to confess to?"

How could a response could the chief give?

"No. I needed to tell you that *Lovely Angel* can't get off the ground," said Yuri. "I was wondering if you could send a ship to pick us up, or else we are going to be stuck here for two months."

"Confined there? For two months?!"

I might have been reading too much into it, but did he look happy at the idea?

"Got it. Just leave everything to me," he replied in an almost giddy voice. "You two must have a bunch of vacation days saved up. Here's a perfect opportunity for an extra-special vacation package, courtesy of your department chief."

I had never heard the chief sounding so invigorated.

"Vacation? Chief, there is nothing to do here. All there is here are toppled mountains and mortuaries!" Yuri prattled desperately.

"Look how nice I am! Giving you a vacation this long is unheard of."

The chief nodded at himself enthusiastically.

"Chief!" Yuri and I screamed in unison, grabbing on to the com screen. This would be a vacation worse than death itself.

"Well then, see you in two months—"

The chief raised his hand, and then the screen went blank.

"CHIEF!!"

The screen was black.

Yuri and I looked at each other as we sunk into our seats.

“Mgyao,” Mugi meowed.

The three of us spent the next two months in the ruins of planet Chakra.

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For more Dirty Pair, [this person](#) seems to be working on some fan translations.

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For formatting corrections, etc., contact
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